

## アクセル・ワールド1

クロユキヒメ きかん  
—黒雪姫の帰還—

どんなに時代が進んでも、この世から「いじめられっ子」は無くならない。デブな中学生・ハルユキもその一人だった。彼が唯一心を安らげる時間は、学内ローカルネットに設置されたスカッシュゲームをプレイしているときだけ。仮想の自分を使って《速さ》を競うその地味なゲームが、ハルユキは好きだった。

季節は秋。相変わらずの日常を過ごしていたハルユキだが、校内一の美貌と気品を持つ少女《黒雪姫》との出会いによって、彼の人生は一変する。

少女が転送してきた謎のソフトウェアを介し、ハルユキは《加速世界》の存在を知る。それは、中学内格差の最底辺である彼が、姫を護る騎士《バーストリンカー》となった瞬間だった。

ウェブ上でカリスマ的人気を誇る作家が、ついに電撃大賞＜大賞＞受賞しデビュー！ 実力派が描く未来系青春エンタテイメント登場！



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アクセル・ワールド1  
黒雪姫の帰還

川原 礫

電撃文庫

Ⓜ 570



ISBN978-4-04-867517-8  
C0193 ¥570E



ASCII  
MEDIA  
WORKS

発行 ● アスキー・メディアワークス

定価: 本体 570 円

※消費税が別に加算されます



かわはら れき  
川原 礫

群馬県高崎市出身、東京都練馬区在住。ストーリーはほぼ全て、荒川を自転車で走りながら考えているので、真冬と梅雨の季節には執筆スピードがガタ落ちする。好物はチーズ系のもの全般とアルミ系のもの全般。苦手はネギの青いところ向かい風と上り坂。

【電撃文庫作品】

アクセル・ワールド1 —黒雪姫の帰還—

イラスト:HIMA

10月3日生まれ。挿絵は今回が初のイラストレーター。「電撃萌王」小冊子への寄稿を見た文庫編集者が、今回の挿絵依頼をオファーしたことがきっかけ。本業仕事の合間を縫って、ブログやSNSサイトなどでイラストを発表している。



# アクセル・ワールド 01

## 黒雪姫の帰還



川原 礫  
イラスト/HIMA  
デザイン/ビィビィ





DO YOU WANT TO ...  
《ACCELERATE》 FURTHER,  
BOY?

THAT PERSON IS...

PINK  
PIG

A YOUNG BOY AT THE BOTTOM  
OF HIS SCHOOL'S SOCIAL CASTE  
AND HARUYUKI'S AVATAR

KUROYUKIHIME

UMESATO MIDDLE SCHOOL,  
VICE PRESIDENT'S AVATAR



A manga-style illustration of a young girl with short, reddish-brown hair tied in pigtails. She has large, expressive brown eyes and a surprised expression with her mouth open. She is wearing a blue school uniform jacket with a large black bow at the collar and a black skirt with white trim. A small pink cat-shaped hair clip is in her hair. The background shows a warm, orange-toned sunset or sunrise scene with a building and a window. Another character's head is partially visible on the left.

"YOU  
DIRECT  
CONNECTING  
WITH  
SECOND  
YEAR'S  
KUROYUKIHIME-SAN,  
WAS IT  
TRUE?"

"E!?  
W, WHA..."

**CHIYURI**

HARUYUKI'S CHILDHOOD FRIEND





"HMM...  
SIMPLY PUT,  
I ASKED  
HIM OUT  
AND HE  
REJECTED  
ME"



A full-page illustration of the character Silver Crow from the anime 'Accel World'. He is shown from the waist up, wearing his signature blue and black armor. His right hand is raised, holding a large, glowing white sphere. The background is a dark, industrial-looking structure with a grid of light blue lines. The overall color palette is dominated by dark blues and blacks, with bright white and light blue highlights from the orb and armor details.

"...WHAT'S  
... THIS"

SILVER  
CROW

HARUYUKI'S  
DUEL AVATAR





# CYAN PILE

A MYSTERIOUS ATTACKER

"I'LL PROTECT.  
DEFINITELY,  
I WILL  
PROTECT  
YOU"



# HARUYUKI

is the...

"Silver Crow"  
in the  
Accelerated  
World.



"Haruyuki Arita"  
in the  
Real World.



"Pink Pig"  
in the  
Umesato Junior  
High School's  
Local Area  
Network.





# ACCEL WORLD<sup>01</sup>

*Return of Princess Snow Black*

***Kawahara Reki***  
***Illustration / HIMA***  
***Design / Biibii***





- **Neuro Linker** = A mobile terminal that establishes a wireless quantum connection to the brain, supporting the five senses, such as sight and hearing.
- **Brain Burst** = An application within the Neuro Linker that Kuoyukihime transferred to Haruyuki.
- **School's Local Net** = A local area network constructed within Umesato Middle School. Used for taking attendance and lessons, it became a need for students of Umesato Middle School to connect to it.
- **Global Connect** = The act of connecting to the Global Net. As connecting to the Global Net is prohibited within Umesato Middle School, the School's Local Net is provided as a replacement.

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**♯ || || || = || || || ♮ = || || || \ J。**



# Chapter 1

On the virtual blackboard's upper right corner, a yellow message mark flashed.

Haruyuki, who was daydreaming during class, involuntarily shrunk his head and shifted the focus of his eyes.

At that moment, the deep green blackboard that was fully in his sight became half transparent—but the backs of students sitting in rows, and the teacher beyond them became sharp.

The classroom, classmates, and teacher existed in the real world, but the transparent blackboard and the closely packed math formula on it was not so. The numbers and formula that the teacher was writing in mid air was sent to the «Neuro Linker» worn on the back of his neck and directly into his brain as a picture.

The elderly math teacher, in a difficult way, moved his finger that held nothing on the blackboard that only he can see and continued to explain the formula in a subdued tone of voice. That voice too, was not at a volume that can reach Haruyuki's ears in the real world, the teacher's Neuro Linker worn around his neck increased the volume and clarity, then sent it to Haruyuki.

When he focused closer again, the blackboard with more math formula than before became solid. So it seems that the mail he received wasn't the teacher sending out a compressed homework file. That means, since



he was currently separated from the global net, the sender must be a student at the same school.

Some girl who broke the school rules and sent him a good message – that kind of expectation, he threw away long ago in the half year after entering middle school. He deeply thought of just dropping the mail into the garbage box in the lower left corner of his view, but if he did that, he didn't know what would happen to him afterwards.

Not really wanting to, seeing the gap when the teacher turned his back, he moved his right hand up (this movement is not virtually, it's real world movement) and clicked the mail icon with his finger.

Instantly, Bubibaborobubiro! A sound without character and a graphic with the primary color of a flood hit Haruyuki's hearing and sight. Continuing, a voice message instead of written words started on the body of the message.

"Pig-kun, this is your command directive for today! (There's Gyahaha laughter in the background) Two fried noodle buns, one cream melon bun, three strawberry yogurts, bring them within 5 minutes at the start of lunch break to the roof! Being late will mean meat bun punishment! Tattling will mean roasted pork fillet punishment! (Again loud laughter)"

- He turned to the sticky stare he felt on his left face, his concentration solidified after his turn. After looking, without a doubt it's Araya and his underlings A and B sneer-sent threat.



Recording this kind of mail with sound and sight effects during class of course is impossible, so they must have made this ahead. What a bunch of leisurely people, and what's this "command directive", the meaning is doubled, idiots!!

He started abusing them in his mind; saying it out loud or putting it in a mail reply was of course something Haruyuki could not do. If Araya was some kind of cockroach level idiot that won't go extinct no matter how far periods advance, then Haruyuki who got bullied by him would be a fool that was tied to the wheel.

Actually, if he had a little courage and willingness to take action, then he could use this mail and the tens of pieces of «evidence» that he kept and give it to the school, and then they would easily be punished.

However, Haruyuki could not stop thinking of what would happen next.

Even if the Neuro Linker is said to be as common as one per person in the country, and that life is said to be half lived in the virtual network, humans still had a «physical body» as a shackle and continued to exist in a low level setting. We are hungry at every meal time and still go to the toilet, and then - getting hit will hurt, crying while hurt will be miserable like death.

Linker Skill will determine school advancement and promotion, that kind of talk is just some huge network company's image strategy. What determines a person's value is after all appearance and physical strength, that kind of primitive parameter.



That was from when the elementary school 5th year student with a weight of over 60kg, during 50 meter runs never managed to go below 10 seconds, and eventually became the 13 year old Haruyuki's conclusion.

Every morning before school, his mother charged his Neuro Linker with 500 yen for lunch money, but buying buns and juices for Araya's group used up all of that. He had around 7000 yen of allowance savings left, but if he used that he won't be able to buy the Linker-only game coming out this month.

Haruyuki's huge body has especially bad fuel consumption, if he skips even one meal, his empty stomach would make him faint, but today he just had to endure it. Also, during lunch break when he can use «Full Dive», there's a special means left to him.

Shrinking his round body as much as possible, Haruyuki headed toward the second school building that was lined with specialty classrooms. Currently, from physics experiments to home economics cooking, lessons are done with virtual classes making these rooms useless, so not many people came here. Especially at lunch time, there was not a single student to be seen.

On the side of a dusty hallway is the men's toilet, it's Haruyuki's personal hidden sanctuary. He totteringly fled inside, stopped to catch his breath, then looked at the mirror above the washstand.

What was reflected from the foggy glass, as if seen in a TV drama, was a too solid and straight «bullied fat kid».



His unmanageable hair bounced here and there, the curves of his cheeks didn't have any sharp angles. Around his fat neck, his uniform necktie and silver Neuro Linker ate into it as if he was being hung.

He had to do something about this appearance. He once went on an almost zero food intake and running like crazy kind of forward thinking period. However the result was, during lunch time he collapsed due to anemia and the worst legend of several female students' lunch as collateral damage was created.

Afterwards, Haruyuki threw away his real self - at least while he was a student - he decided.

He removed his eyes from the mirror after 0.1 of a second, and then went farther inside the room, into a cubicle. He made sure to lock it, then lowered the toilet seat cover and sat on it. He was already used to the plastic cutting into his lower body. He laid his back on the water tank, relaxed, and closed his eyes.

His chanting was like a magic spell to release his soul from his heavy body.

"Direct Link."

When the Neuro Linker received the voice command, its quantum connection level went up from sight and sound mode to full sense mode, Haruyuki's feeling of body weight and the squeezing of his stomach from hunger disappeared.



The toilet seat's hard surface and his school uniform's tight fit also disappeared. The joyful sound of students from the far off school yard, the smell of cleaning agents in the toilet, and the door that was right in front of him, melted into darkness. «Full Dive».

Even the sense of gravity was cut. Haruyuki fell into the depth of darkness. However, soon a soft floating feeling and rainbow light covered his whole body. From the tip of his hands and feet, the «Avatar» used for Full Dive was being formed.

Black hoof-like hands and feet, plump limbs and the ball-like body with a fresh pink color. He can't see it himself, but there should be a flat nose in the center of his face, and big ears hanging down. That is, to say in other words, the shape of a pink pig.

The comical avatar shape, with a thump, landed in the middle of an educational scientist recommended design. It was still a fairy-tale forest.

Huge mushrooms grew everywhere, the strikingly bright sun shone on circular grass fields, and in the center, a crystal like spring gushed.

At the outer edge, like a huge tree with an empty center, many wheels were stacked above. Those were for conversation and relaxation use and many levels were separated and connected by stairs.

This virtual space is the local network of the Suginami district's Umesato Middle School that Haruyuki attends.



Those walking or talking in the forest by twos or threes while producing laughter were mostly non-human. About half were comical animals walking on two legs, the rest were winged (but flightless) fairies, tin plated robots, and robe covered magic users. They were all avatars of Umesato Middle School students or teachers diving in the local network.

The student's avatar can be freely picked from many source selections, and can be customized. If you have the perseverance, you can even use the provided editor and start a fully original avatar from scratch. Even though it was a middle school student's skill and sense, the self-made black knight that he debuted in April attracted a lot of attention.

- That was just a fleeting moment of glory. Haruyuki sighed and looked down at his current shape. Within the time of an eye blink, Araya got involved with the black knight avatar, so Haruyuki was forced to use this default pig.

Naturally, this pink pig didn't lose in the point of being unique, because no one was willing to pick this self-degrading body. Similar to the real world, Haruyuki shrunk his round body as much as possible while trotting toward a tree.

Then, on the spring's banks, he noticed a remarkably large crowd. While running he looked at them, and slowed his feet without thinking. In the center of the group of students, he saw a rare avatar that was seldom seen.



It was not something in the default set. A deep black dress studded with transparent gems. Hands holding a black parasol. On the back, black swallowtail butterfly wings with rainbow-colored lines running in them.

A snow white face shaded by long straight hair, it was such a perfect beauty that it was hard to believe it was self-made. Haruyuki too couldn't possibly compete with this kind of design skill that a professional might use.

Leaning her delicate body slovenly on a huge mushroom and listening to the surrounding avatars talk with a listless expression, Haruyuki knew her as the 2nd year student who was also the vice-president of the student council. The surprising thing was that this beauty was an almost perfect replica of her real self, that's why her offered street name was -.

«Snow Black». «Kuroyukihime».

That kind of existence and himself, their only common point was that they were both Umesato Middle School students, he felt like it was some kind of lie. Looking with virtual view like this made him feel like his tortured self-conscious sense of being a dwarf increase, so he forcibly turned his head to face forward.

His full strength dash destination was a tree set with relaxation rooms. Simply said it is a game corner, of course without a single market software like RPGs or battle games. It's filled with quiz, puzzle and other educational types, with healthy sports games, but even so, many students filled each corner, making cheering sounds.



They were all in Full Dive from their classroom seat or from the school cafeteria. During that time, their real bodies were left defenseless, playing tricks on someone in a dive is obviously a violation of manners but the only person who cared was Haruyuki. Diving in the local network from the classroom, when he returned, his school uniform pants were removed. That was something that happened to him less than a month after entering school.

Hiding his real body in the toilet, fleeing from people's eyes in the virtual space, he went up the stairs carved in the tree trunk. The higher up it went, the less popular the games became.

He passed by baseball, basketball, golf, tennis, and what he arrived at after ignoring the soccer floor was the «Virtual Squash Game» corner.

There was not a single student. The reason it was unpopular is clear. Squash is similar to tennis, but where you hit the ball with a racket was a square space with hard walls on all sides, you silently continue to return a bouncing ball. It's a very lonely sport.

Normally the game genre Haruyuki liked was FPS<sup>[1]</sup> where he held a machine gun and ran around a battlefield where he had skills that were above par even compared to Americans. Of course this is a popular genre even in Japan, but there was no way a school network had that kind of game, also - while in elementary school, he used one handguns to kill most of his male classmates in a game, the next day he suffered terrible bullying that left very painful memories. After that, Haruyuki vowed to



never play a game, no matter what genre, with those guys at school again.

He walked to the right side of the empty court and touched the control panel with one hand. He entered his student ID, then his saved level and high score was read out.

During the first school semester, Haruyuki spent most of his lunch periods in this game to waste time. The result was that his score became a shocking number. He was starting to get bored of it, but there was no other place for him to go. His pink right hand with black hoof held tightly onto the racket that floated up from the panel.

After the words 'Game Start', a ball dropped from nowhere. He hit it with the racket injecting it with today's gloom with all of his might.

Leaving only a flash, the ball flew like a laser, hit the floor and front wall and then returned. His reaction was faster than sight, following his brain's automatically led optimal solution, he moved left one step while hitting a backhand.

The real Haruyuki of course could not do this movement. But this was the electronic world which released him from his raw physical limitations. Recognizing the ball and moving the body was just quantum signal communications between the brain and Neuro Linker.

The ball slowly lost substance and became flashing trajectory paths. Pon Pon effects sounded many times a second, like a machine gun firing.



Even so, Haruyuki's pig body freely jumped around, his racket continuing to twist in all directions.

Shit - I don't need reality.

His mind should not wander when challenging the game speed at its limit, but his mind full of resentment still shouted.

Why was shit like real school and classrooms still necessary? Humans can just live in the virtual world, and the adults who actually did that were way too many. In the past, experiments were done where the human consciousness was wholly converted to electronic data, and they built a real different world.

Even so, for learning group living, fostering sentiment, and other idiotic reasons, children were thrown into the cage of reality together. For people like Araya it's probably fine, they can release stress moderately, and save their allowance. But, for me - beyond this, what can I do.

With a Pipon sound, the game level in the side view went up.

The ball suddenly sped up. Its angle of reflection became irregular and it came attacking at a path that was outside of his prediction.

Haruyuki's reaction slowly started to become late.

More - more acceleration!

The virtual world, real world too, break past all the walls, go to a place with no one -



Hurry!

Cleanly, his racket cut through the air. The ball that became light grazed Haruyuki's cheek, passed behind him and disappeared. With a miserable and comical sound effect, the words 'Game Over' fell down, and bounced in the court.

Without looking at the high score shown, the droopy Haruyuki headed toward the panel to restart the game.

At that time, a sudden voice shook Haruyuki's holy sanctuary.

"Ah - !! You were hiding in this kind of place!!"

A high pitched yelling sound numbed his ears, no, his brain with a shriek. Startled, Haruyuki with his back tense turned to look. He saw a similar animal type student's avatar.

Even so, it didn't have a particle of humor like Haruyuki's pig. Supple and slender, a purplish silver fur covered cat. The ear and tip of the tail were tied with a deep blue ribbon. It was not made with polygons from scratch, but many of its parameters had been customized.

Angry colors floated in its golden iris eyes, the cat's mouth with many small teeth opened wide and shouted again.

"Haru has always been missing during lunch time lately so I was searching! Games are fine, but you don't have to play this minor one, go play with everyone below!"



"...It's my choice, leave me alone."

That was the only thing he could reply with as Haruyuki turned back to the court. However the silver cat extended its neck, took a glance at the Game Over display then again shouted with a high pitch voice.

"What, what is this... Level 152, Score 2,630,000!? You..."

- Are awesome!

Even if shameful, Haruyuki momentarily expected this kind of speech, but the cat unceremoniously betrayed him.

"Are you an idiot!? What were you doing without eating lunch! Disconnect right now!!"

"...No way, there's still 30 minutes of lunch time left. You should go away somewhere."

"I see, if that is your attitude, then I'll have to use force."

"Do your worst."

After his muttered reply, Haruyuki held onto his racket again. The school net avatar doesn't have «impact determination». On the context of preventing inappropriate conduct, a student cannot touch another student's avatar. Of course, forcing someone to log out is out of question.

The cat avatar, after extending its small tongue out to the limit for a Be~<sup>[2]</sup>, shouted.

"Link Out!"



Instantly, leaving a light vortex and bell like sound, the cat disappeared.

The noisy one finally disappeared as he heaved a short sigh from his nose while feeling slightly lonely. At that moment.

Bang! A serious kind of attack hit his head and the surrounding view disappeared. From the darkness, pulled by spots of light, he returned to the real world's scenery.

While feeling his heavy weight, Haruyuki desperately blinked, trying to focus.

Originally a men's toilet cubicle, however, instead of the blue-grey door in front of him, Haruyuki saw something he wasn't expecting.

"You... Why...!?"

Standing imposingly in front of him, was a single female student. The color of her blazer and ribbon showed that she was a similar first year student.

She was small, less than  $\frac{1}{3}$  of Haruyuki's weight. Her short-cut fringe was raised on the right side with a blue hairpin. Cat like small contour, disproportionately large eyes burning with anger stared at Haruyuki.

Her left hand held a small basket, and her right hand extended right above Haruyuki's head, in a small fist. Seeing that, Haruyuki finally understood why he had been suddenly disconnected from Full Dive. The female student had hit his head with that fist, and the shock activated the Neuro Linker's safety causing an automatic Link Out.

Normally, the safety would activate from shaking the shoulder or a loud shout, but for sensitive girls, if anyone gets within a meter of them, they were set to Link Out. The reason Haruyuki didn't notice the intruder until he was hit on the head was since he was hiding in a toilet stall, he set his safety level to the lowest.

"Why you!!"

Surprised and amazed, Haruyuki shouted at the only girl in this school that he can talk to without panicking.

"What were you doing! This is the men's toilet! The door was locked... are you an idiot!!"

"You are the idiot."

Haruyuki's childhood friend while wearing a skirt climbed over the wall of the men's toilet stall, this strong person is Kurashima Chiyuri, after replying in a sulky voice, she pulled back her right hand and unlocked the door behind her.

With a light movement, she jumped out of the stall. Haruyuki's eyes narrowed from the sunlight reflected from her chestnut-color hair, Chiyuri finally had a small smile on her face, and added.

"Hey, come out already."

"...I got it."



Swallowing his sigh, Haruyuki stood up as the toilet seat cover creaked. While chasing Chiyuri who was heading to the exit, he had another question.

"...How did you know I was here?"

The reply did not come immediately. After poking her head out of the men's toilet to check outside, Chiyuri slipped into the hallway and tersely said.

"I was on the roof too. So I followed you."

That means -.

"...You saw."

Haruyuki stopped after putting one step into the hallway, and whispered.

Looking like she was trying to find the right words, Chiyuri leaned her back on the far wall, and then finally nodded.

"...I won't say anything more about those guys. Since Haru decided that was fine... I have no choice. But you should eat your lunch. It's bad for your body."

With a forced smile, Chiyuri held out the basket in her left hand.

"I made lunch. I can't guarantee it'll taste good though."

- So miserable, Haruyuki thought.

His heart trying to find feeling beyond compassion in Chiyuri's words and actions was without a doubt pitiful.

Because Chiyuri had a genuine boyfriend. In many ways opposite of Haruyuki, their other childhood friend.

His mouth moved on its own, a strangely flat voice issued, Haruyuki heard it.

"...Remains of what you made for Taku?"

Chiyuri's face suddenly became cloudy. Unable to stand looking into her eyes with raised eyebrows, Haruyuki looked down at the hallway.

"That's not true, Ta-kun has school lunch. This... sandwich is made with potato salad, ham and cheese. Haru's favorite right."

Haruyuki extended his right hand to push back the white basket that entered his view.

However, the slow real body moved in a different way from his control, the sudden movement knocked the basket from Chiyuri's hand and fell. Upon hitting the floor the cover opened, from inside the water color cooking paper, one or two triangle cut sandwich fell out and broke apart.

"Ah..."

He wanted to apologize on reflex, but the inside of his head became hot and the words he should have spoken could not take shape. He could not



raise his head, and stepped back while cowering, then he shouted and turned around.

"I don't want them!!"

He wanted to log out from this place right now, Haruyuki painfully thought, but of course that's impossible. He should at least run, but his real body became unbelievably heavy, he could not escape from the small voice behind him.

In the worst mood, he passed the afternoon lessons and home room, and fled out of the classroom.

He pushed the voice in his head aside that told him to wait for Chiyuri at two classrooms next to his, or in front of the school, or on the way home to apologize, and went to his other hidden place, the library.

Originally, the usefulness of places like the library were gone. However, some adults thought that in a school, children need the same paper media books to learn, so with a waste of material and space, brand new hard cover books lined the shelves.

Mostly due to this, he has an important personal space within the school, so he can't complain. He took two or three hardcover books for camouflage and went into a reading booth near the wall. He pushed his body into a tight chair, and went into Full Dive with a volume barely recognizable by the Linker.

Since it was only a few minutes after classes had ended, the school net was still quiet. He should go right now to hide in his usual place as he quickly passed by the grass field then climbed the tree.

The virtual squash corner of course was devoid of people. Honestly, he did not want to simply hit a ball, he wanted to go into a bloody battle where he can blow away the fuzzy feeling in his chest as soon as possible, but without a global net connection and inside the school where games were not allowed to start, it was impossible.

His empty stomach was also beyond limit, but even so he did not feel like going home right away. If he met Chiyuri on the way home, he had absolutely no idea what expression to make or what words to use. No, apologizing should be fine, but he did not have the confidence that his mouth would follow his intentions.

- It's the same as that time.

In the past, he made Chiyuri cry similar to now, he was starting to remember that time so he tightly closed his eyes. He moved his right hand to the panel and logged in.

He groped for the racket and held it, then turned his body to face the court.

Opening his eyes, he was going to hit the falling ball with the many gloomy feelings -.

Haruyuki's full body froze.



"Level... 166!?"

His level that had just increased a few hours ago, yet now more than 10 levels had been added.

How, the score is stored with the student ID, after an instant of thought, he understood. That time, he was forced to log out because Chiyuri hit his head and the game was kept like that. That means it's possible that someone continued to play and changed the score. However...

Who else other than himself could make this kind of ridiculous score!?

For Haruyuki's pride that was on the blink of collapse, his support was his VR game technique under Full Dive. Of course, excluding quiz and board games where your knowledge decided the outcome, for reaction speed types like gun shooting and action race games, he had the conceit that no one else in the school could beat him.

He wasn't showing off. The reason why he did not stand out was that he learned from very bad experiences during elementary school. There was no proof, but as he thought up to this point - who made this squash game's fearsome score...

At that time.

Behind him, there was a voice. It was female, but it wasn't Chiyuri's. A much lower tone, a sound as smooth as silk.

"You made that absurd score?"

He fearfully turned around, standing in front of him was.

A silver-studded dark dress. Staff, or sword like parasol poked the ground. Pure white skin and jet black eyes - «Kuroyukihime».

Even though an avatar, she didn't have a digital feel to her, an extreme beauty tilted slightly, the school's most famous person moved forward without making a sound.

A slight smile appeared on her red lips, the only place in her body with any color, and Kuroyukihime continued saying.

"Do you want to... «Accelerate» further ahead, boy?"

"If you are interested, come to the school lounge at lunch time tomorrow."

Leaving just that sentence behind, Kuroyukihime abruptly logged out.

Her avatar was in Haruyuki's view for less than 10 seconds. Was it a local network server bug? If it wasn't an illusion, then what's left was something that won't happen in a thousand years, however, the fearsome score floating in the court is real.

Haruyuki didn't feel like challenging a new high score anymore, so he ended the dive and continued to sit in the reading booth while spacing out. Inside his ears, the three lines of speech repeated in an infinite loop. Kuroyukihime's expression was diverse as a middle school female student, but that overwhelming presence mixed with uncomfortable feeling was something no one had. It's partly why she was ultra popular with not only males, but females as well.



He eventually left school on fluffy legs and headed home with his body mostly on automatic mode. If it wasn't for his Neuro Linker on sight and sound mode doing traffic prediction navigation, he would have been hit by cars two or three times already.

Returning to the empty Kouenji high-rise mansion home, Haruyuki heated up a frozen pizza and ate it with a soda drink. His parent divorced long ago and was now living with his mother. She won't be back home till after midnight, and he only sees her for a moment when he gets lunch money from her before going to school.

His empty stomach filled with junk food, Haruyuki returned to his room. Normally, he would check his patrol course in the Global Net, and then he would bustle about the battlefields around Europe for a few hours, while his remaining strength would be for homework and then sleep, but just today he didn't feel like doing anything.

Since too many things happened today, his brain felt heavy like it was swollen. Haruyuki changed his clothes, removed his Neuro Linker and then fell heavily on the bed.

He wanted to say his sleep was very peaceful. But dreams of Araya group's scorn, Chiyuri's tears, and Kuroyukihime's mysterious speech kept repeating made him toss and turn.

Do you want to - «Accelerate» further ahead?

Inside his dream, instead of Kuroyukihime's avatar, it was the real student council vice president's shape. He should not have seen her other than

on the stage of school assembly where she kept a detached and expressionless face, but while in his dream, she has a little devil like smile inviting him somewhere, and whispered in Haruyuki's ear. 'Come here.'



## Chapter 2

Yes, everything was a dream. Including yesterday's encounter in the local network.

The next day, Wednesday, Haruyuki went to school with his usual gloomy face and thought that while entering his classroom.

In the déjà-vu lesson, Araya group's bullying mail came again. It was the first time that they had extorted lunch for two days in a row. What they wanted was same as yesterday, fried noddle bun and cream melon bun. How much do they like those anyway? He closed the mail while thinking that, and left his seat when the bell for lunch chimed.

Where his slow feet headed however was not the roof that Araya's group asked him to go, but the first floor in the school building, the lounge next to the student cafeteria.

Instead of the cheap long tables lined up in the cafeteria, the half circular lounge is filled with elegant white round tables. Beyond the large glass window for lighting, the autumn colors of the central courtyard's trees can be seen clearly. Without a doubt this is the highest rank space in Umesato middle school.

Hence, there's an unwritten law that first years are not allowed to use it. The students around the tables with their ribbons and neckties were all blue (2nd year) or dark red (3rd year), there wasn't a single green.

Half of the upperclassmen held a cup of coffee or tea in one hand while chatting to each other, while the other half leaned back on high back chairs with eyes closed. Not sleeping, but rather Full Diving on the school network.

Haruyuki first hid his large body behind a decorative plant in front of the lounge entrance, then looked around inside.

She couldn't be there, that thing yesterday was a dream, he more than half believed it - but.

"...She's there..."

He involuntarily swallowed a breath of air. In the deepest part of the lounge, at a table near the window, there was a striking group. Six students, a mix of 2nd and 3rd years. Looking closely, he could recognize them all. They are all current student council members, male or female in different orientations, and all of them were handsome or beautiful.

The largest presence in that group was a female student with a blue ribbon, flipping the pages of a hardcover book with melancholy. Her long hair that came down to nearly her waist was a deep black that was rare nowadays. Her legs that peeked out from her dark grey pleated skirt were covered with black stockings too. He was surprised that her open-collared shirt under her blazer was also glossy black. Without a doubt - she was Umesato middle school's most famous person, «Kuroyukihime».

From the lounge entrance to that far table, it should be less than 20 meters in a straight line. However, that distance felt like it was almost



infinite to Haruyuki. Passing by upperclassman to get there is like an adventure that he couldn't possibly complete.

Turn around and go back, then buy buns and juice from the school cafeteria and bring them to the roof for Araya's group. After that go hide in the 2nd school building toilet and play a single person game in the local net to waste time.

- Shit. Damn. I will go.

Haruyuki ground his teeth, came out from behind the decorative plant's shade, and stepped into the lounge.

The stares from the upperclassmen in the surrounding tables were not just his paranoia, but contained actual criticism and displeasure. A new student might not know, but in the latter half of 2nd term, all 1st years should know about the no entry rule.

However, no one said anything to blame him. His shaking legs earnestly carried his heavy body, passing between the tables with Haruyuki almost losing his breath until finally reaching the deepest section controlled by the student council.

The first to raise her head was a 2nd year who sat nearest to him. The female student's fluffy hair waved as she turned her head to face Haruyuki with a slightly questioning smile and kindly said.

"Oh... What is your business?"

'I have business here.' Being unable to say that, Haruyuki mumbled.

"Well... That is... err..."

At that time, the remaining four members all looked at Haruyuki. Their faces did not have any ill will, but he almost could no longer stand the displeased stares from the surrounding tables, when he was about to faint from all the tension, the last member finally raised her head from her book.

Kuroyukihime's face first seen at close range with naked eye really was many times more beautiful than the avatar that he (thought) saw yesterday. Under her cleanly split front hair, below her clear eyebrows, were eyes that even the iris looked black, shining brightly. If her avatar can be compared to a black rose, then she would be a black *narcissus*. He did not know if such a thing existed or not.

He was prepared for that beautiful face to show a 'what?' expression to match his unsightly year-level.

However he was deeply surprised, Kuroyukihime's lightly color lips showed a familiar smile and she said a short line.

"You came, boy."

She closed the hard cover book with a clap sound, while standing up right waved Haruyuki over, her view moved to the members at the table.

"He has business with me. Sorry, can you empty that space?"





The latter half was directed at the 3rd year male sitting next to her. The short hair, tall upperclassman stood up with an amazed expression and used his palm to show his chair to Haruyuki.

After mumbling thanks, Haruyuki shrunk his round body to the limit and sat down. The delicate chair creaked loudly, but Kuroyukihime did not seem to care about it as she took out a bundle of something small and long from her blazer's left pocket after searching in it.

It was a cable. The cord was shielded with thin silver lines, and both ends had a small plug. Her left hand raised the hair at her back, there was a Neuro Linker around her surprisingly small neck (Of course, the Linker was piano black), her right hand inserted one end of the plug into her Neuro Linker, and casually handed the other end to Haruyuki.

This time for sure, the students in the lounge waiting to see what would happen broke into a huge buzz. Screams of 'It must be a lie' and 'No it can't be' could be heard from it.

Haruyuki was dumbfounded too. Sweat started pouring out of his face.

«Wired Direct Connect Communication».

Normally called Direct Connect, it was something that Kuroyukihime wanted to do with Haruyuki. Neuro Linkers normally use wireless communication with each other using the network in that area, under many levels of security. However, with Wired Direct Connect, 90% of the security wall became useless. For people with a certain level of Linker skill,

they can peek into the other person's private memory, or install malicious programs.

That is to say normally, Direct Connect is only done with people one trusted the most - family or lovers only. Saying it in another way, males and females who used Direct Connect in public places were very likely to be going out with each other. The cable length being a measure of intimacy is something of an existing custom without technical justification.

The XSB cable that Kuroyukihime was holding out right now was about 2 meters, however in this situation the length doesn't matter. While looking at the shining silver plug, Haruyuki somehow managed to make a sound to ask.

"...U, Umm, what do I do with..."

"It has no other use than to be plugged into your neck."

She instantly confirmed it. While Haruyuki was about to faint, his shaking fingers accepted the plug and inserted it into his Neuro Linker.

At that moment, a «Wired Connection» warning was displayed in front of his eyes. When that faded away, from the view of the lounge, only Kuroyukihime's shape freshly floated in front of him.

Without moving her lips that had a slight smile, a smooth voice sounded in Haruyuki's brain.

"Sorry to make you come all the way here, Arita Haruyuki-kun. Can you do thought talk?"

It's a skill where you talk through the Linker without moving your lips.  
Haruyuki nodded then replied.

"Yes. Umm... what is this really about? Is this an elaborate, well... prank or something?"

He thought she would be angry. Kuroyukihime shook her head slightly and gave a 'Hmm'.

"Well... In a certain sense it might just be that because I will send an application to your Neuro Linker. If you accept that, then your current reality will be completely destroyed, and be rebuilt in a shape you can't imagine."

"...Re, Reality... destroyed...?"

Haruyuki repeated in blank amazement.

He no longer saw the students around the tables full of curiosity or heard their noisy comments. Only Kuroyukihime's words repeated in his mind.

The deep black upperclassman looked at Haruyuki with another smile, and raising her right hand, her supple white fingers made something slide.

Pon, a beep sounded.

[Execute BB2039.exe? YES/NO] A holo dialogue appeared.

This should be a familiar system display, but he thought this window seemed to have its own intention that forced him to make a decision.



With common sense, executing an unknown application sent by a stranger over Direct Connect would be indiscretion. He should pull out the cable right now. However, Haruyuki for some reason could not do that. In exchange, he looked down at his body squeezed into the chair.

- Reality. My reality.

Stolid body, lackluster appearance, repeatedly being bullied and escaping to the net, and more than anything, the self that did not change this situation. Being like this is fine, since nothing will change, this self that gave up.

Haruyuki moved his view, and looked into Kuroyukihime's dark eyes.

In half a second, he raised his right hand, and thrust his finger into the YES button. Her white face held a slightly surprised expression, slightly satisfied, he relaxed his chest.

"That's my wish. This reality... if it was destroyed..."

He whispered that, at the same time.

In his full view, a huge flame erupted.

He instinctively stiffened his body as it seemed as if the wild fire might sweep him up, but its flow eventually concentrated in front of his body, transforming into a logo. Its design sense was certainly not new. It was a harshness that reminded him of the late last century, of a certain popular VS fighting game.

The words that appeared were - «BRAIN BURST».

This is how Haruyuki met the single program that would revolutionize him and his recognized reality.

The installation continued for about 30 seconds. It was a huge application even for the Neuro Linker.

The indicator bar under the burning title logo finally reaching 100%, Haruyuki swallowed his breath and watched. Reality - will be destroyed, was what Kuroyukihime said. How exactly is that shown?

The indicator disappeared along with the logo as if it was being burnt. The remaining orange fire displayed in small English font the message «Welcome to the Accelerated World», which was soon split like fireworks. What does it mean - Accelerated World?

Haruyuki held his breath for about 10 seconds in anticipation.

However, his own body or the surrounding view, nothing felt like it was going to change. As usual, under his uniform, he is wet with sweat, and the displeased stares from the surrounding tables seemed to increase.

Letting out a short yet lengthy breath, Haruyuki looked questioningly at Kuroyukihime.

"Umm... This «Brain Burst» program, what is..."

Asking with thought talk, the black clothed upperclassman, while maintaining her smile, said something different from his question.

"It installed without any problems. I was confident that you had enough aptitude for it."

"Aptitude? For this program?"

"Yes. «Brain Burst» cannot be installed in someone without a high level brain neurological response rate. For example, like someone that can make stupidly huge scores in virtual games. When you saw the illusion flames, the program was checking your brain's response. If there's not enough aptitude, you won't even see the title logo. However, I was a little bit surprised. For me, it took about two minutes of doubt whether to accept this strange program. This made all the speech I prepared to convince you useless."

"Ah... Sorry. But, that, nothing... seems to be happening. It's not a resident application, but a select execution type?"

"Well, don't be in such a hurry. From now you will need a little mental preparedness. I will explain the basic functions later. Why, we have plenty of time."

Haruyuki took a quick glance at the continuous time displayed in his view's lower right corner. Half of lunch time had already passed. He didn't think they had plenty of time left.



He painfully felt the curiosity and disgust in the surrounding atmosphere, and leaned back. The chair under his body squeaked.

That was a familiar sound, but it felt like even the chair was laughing at his ugly and comical self as he bit his lip. There's no way he would love this reality. If it can be changed, no matter what kind of change it was, he would accept it.

"...I am already mentally prepared. Please teach me about this program..."

He got that far, when...

He could hear the voice he didn't want to hear the most coming from the lounge entrance behind Haruyuki.

"You dickwad, Pi... Arita! You can't escape!!"

Haruyuki cowered in reaction, his waist lifted from the chair. When he turned around, he saw a red-faced Araya standing there. He wasn't supposed to leave the roof while at lunch time.

As Haruyuki's expression changed from surprise to fear, Araya's face also changed from rage to doubt. After Haruyuki stood up, Kuroyukihime's delicate shape and the cable that connected their Linkers, which were hidden behind his huge body earlier were shown.

While frozen, Haruyuki's sensitive feelings detected that other than the council members, the rest of the students around him, their atmosphere were subtly changing. What the relationship between the same green necktie but big build Araya and the small but large width Haruyuki's was,

they probably instantly realized. However the students didn't show displeasure toward Araya, but an 'Ah, so it really is' kind of understanding.

Stop - Stop this right now.

Haruyuki desperately wished. He absolutely did not want Kuroyukihime to know that he was being bullied or such. 'After I finish here, I will buy buns and bring them to the roof so please wait there quietly', he wanted to tell him that, so he faced Araya and forced a smile.

Araya, who saw that smile, further increased his outrage, turning his face purple. 'Pig', his lips moved without sound, Haruyuki saw in horror. The meaning of his smile while in Direct Connect with the school's most famous person was totally misunderstood by Araya.

With his eyes lifted up shining, Araya silently dove into the hedge that separated the cafeteria and the lounge. With the heel of his indoor shoes making crushing sounds, he approached in a direct line. Behind him, his underlings A and B followed with somewhat tensed faces.

It's hopeless, while thinking that Haruyuki took a step back.

Araya is unbelievably tall for being 13 years old, the same age as him. He might be doing karate or something of the like, as he's built up quite a lot of muscle. He wore a short blazer over a long lavender shirt, and big pants. His white-tinged golden dyed hair stood up like a mountain of swords, his small eyebrows and piercings on both ears, his colored up-angle eyes all spelt danger.

Umesato middle school is a private future preparation school, but since this is a low fertility era, just about no middle schools require an entrance exam. So a fighting type like Araya came here thinking "Easy to control".

With that handicap, Haruyuki was controlled on his first day entering school. He wimpishly looked up at the Araya who stood in front, looking down at him.

"Don't underestimate me."

After the line came out of Araya's twisted lips, Haruyuki was about to mouth a servile apology, but before that.

From behind him, Kuroyukihime's real voice with a cool rich inflection was heard.

"You are Araya-kun right?"

Araya who heard that was surprised for an instant, then had a flattering smile. Even this guy is happy that his name is remembered by «That Kuroyukihime».

However, what she said not only shocked Araya, but Haruyuki as well.

"I heard about you from Arita-kun. About whether you were mistakenly sent from the zoo to the middle school or not."

Araya's jaw dropped and started trembling, Haruyuki looked while dumbfounded.

"Wh... Wh... What..."



At the same time that Araya's mouth starting to move, Haruyuki wanted to shout.

Wh - Why did you say that!

But that thought did not become sound, Araya released a tremendous roar.

"Why you, I am going to kill you, pig!!"

Haruyuki shrunk from fear, he saw Araya's right fist tighten and held high.

At the same time, in his brain, a piercing voice commanded Haruyuki.

"Shout now! «Burst Link»!!"

Haruyuki did not know if he used his real voice or thought voice to say that short command. However, he felt for sure that every corner of his body reverberated with that sound.

Burst Link!!

Bashiiiiii!! With that impact sound, the world wavered.

The colors were drained, replaced by a transparent blue that started to spread out. The surrounding lounge, the staring students, and Araya in front of him as well, all became a monotonous blue.

Everything stopped at that moment.

Araya's fist that should have hit him flying in a second, was frozen a few centimeters in front of him, he watched while dumbfounded.

"U... uwaa!!"

He involuntarily shouted, and jumped back a step.

The result of that action showed him something else that was hard to believe.

His own back. He was the same blue color as Araya, his round back was unnaturally stopped in a comical cowering position. It looked like only his soul left his physical body.

Then, what happened to him now!? He looked down in surprise and there he found the familiar looking pink pig. Without a doubt, it's the avatar he used in the local net.

No longer understanding anything, Haruyuki turned around shakily.

In front of his eyes, was another strange sight.

On the lounge chair, Kuroyukihime sat with elegance, her back straight and lap tightly closed. However, that body too, including the cable extending from her neck, was all transparent blue like a crystal.

And next to her body, in a black dress with a parasol, her avatar with the swallowtail butterfly wings stood with a mysterious smile.

"Wh... What is this!?"

Haruyuki frightfully shouted.

"Full Dive!? Or... astral projection!?"

"Fufu, neither of those."

With a happy tone, Kuroyukihime's avatar told him.

"We are now under «Brain Burst» program's function. «Accelerated»."

"Ac... Accelerate...?"

"Yes. The surrounding looks stopped but that's not true. Our consciousness is moving at ultra fast speed."

Kuroyukihime moved a few steps with the silver balls at her cuff's rim shining, and stopped beside the blue frozen reality of Haruyuki and Araya. The tip of her parasol pointed at Araya's fist in the path of a right straight punch.

"This fist too, you cannot notice it, but is even moving very slowly... Like the short hand of a clock. If we continue to wait, it will eventually pass this 80cm or so and we will see it make a dent in your face."

"That's no joke. No that's not it... wait a minute please."

Haruyuki held his head with his two pig hands, desperately trying to sort the information.

"Th, this means... Our souls did not leave our body right? Does that mean our thoughts are from our original heads?"

"You catch on fast. That's exactly it."



"But, isn't that strange! If only thoughts and feelings got sped up, this... astral projection like movement, looking at your own back, that means I shouldn't be able to talk to senpai<sup>[3]</sup>!"

"Hmm, a good question, Haruyuki-kun."

Kuroyukihime nodded her head like a teacher, and then with her length-wise rolled hair waving, moved to beside the table.

"The blue world we are seeing is the real world in real time, but it's not seen with light refracting in our eyes. Take a look under this table."

"O, ok..."

Haruyuki lowered his pig body that's smaller than his real body, and peeked under the blue table.

"Ah, huh?"

Strange. The table is made from wood and its surface has many cross-grains running length-wise. However the underside is smooth like plastic, without any texture.

"What is this... Looks like polygons...?"

When he raised his face, he saw Kuroyukihime lightly nod a few times.

"Exactly. This blue world is made up of pictures from many Social Cameras in the lounge with the pictures made into 3D scene and then sent to your brain through the Neuro Linker. The areas in the cameras'

dead zones are filled in with conjecture. So, peeking under this girl's skirt will be useless."

The Social Camera's actual name is Social Security Surveillance Camera, for maintaining security, they are placed all over Japan, and it means a government video surveillance network. Even a private middle school cannot reject camera placement, that data is protected with strong national level security walls, a normal citizen absolutely cannot peek into it - that was what was said, but...

While thinking about such a theory, Haruyuki in reaction followed the female student council member's leg which was extended under the table, he confirmed that the graceful line ended at her skirt's edge.

After he hastily stood up, he saw Kuroyukihime giving him a sharp glance.

"Don't look at my legs. They are within the camera's view."

"I... won't look."

While taking effort to steady his glaze, Haruyuki shook his head.

"W, well, after seeing this, I somewhat understand the theory. This is the real time world made into 3D... we use avatars as substitute bodies to see and talk through direct connection right?"

"That's right. Now, for convenience sake, you are using your school local net's avatar."

"If possible, I would prefer another."

After whispering, he gave a huge sigh. While shaking his pig head to sort his thoughts, he looked at Kuroyukihime's avatar again.

"But... this is just half way. What I want to know is from here on.

...«Accelerate», what exactly is it? I have never heard of Neuro Linker having this kind of time stop like function!"

"Of course, the Neuro Linker's secret accelerate function can only be drawn out with the «Brain Burst» program, or people with that program."

After Kuroyukihime whispered that, raised her left hand, and poked the XL size Neuro Linker around the reality frozen Haruyuki's neck.

"Haruyuki-kun, do you know the operating principle of the Neuro Linker?"

Seeing the slender finger touching «his» neck, Haruyuki felt a thump for no reason and nodded.

"Y, yes... just perfunctory information. Using quantum level connection with brain cells, picture, sound and sensation can be sent, that means canceling reality's five senses..."

"That's right. That means its principle is basically different from 2020s headgear type VR machine, or 30s implant type. Quantum connection is not a biological mechanism. That is, it won't put any burden on the brain cells, and you can do unreasonable things... someone realized that."

"Unreasonable... that means?"



To Haruyuki's question, Kuroyukihime returned a somewhat different question.

"Have you played with a 20s era PC?"

"Y, yeah, I did. I have one at home too."

"Then, you know what the PC's standard operating frequency is called right?"

"Base Clock... ?"

Kuroyukihime nodded with satisfaction.

"Yes... the oscillator on the motherboard sends out a signal, with a set multiplier moving the CPU at an overclocked speed. And then the human brain, our consciousness operates with the same mechanism."

"What...!?"

Haruyuki's eyes became round, and his pig nose breath out rapidly.

"No, no way. Where is our oscillator?"

"Here."

Kuroyukihime instantly replied, she hugged the reality blue Haruyuki from the front, with roguish up-turn eyes, her left hand poked the center of the back.

"Wh... wh, what are you doing?"

"Right now, your clock went up a little. You already know right... the heart! The heart is not just a pump for sending out blood. The beats determines the thinking speed, it's a standard clock generator."

Taking a breath, Haruyuki touched his pig body's chest. Kuroyukihime, like she was teasing him, still continued to touch around his heart area.

"Even if the body is in a stopped state, depending on the situation the heart beat will increase... like a racing driver. Why? That is thought - situational awareness, and judgement «Acceleration» is necessary. Or is it like two lovers gently caressing each other? Each minute and second to be profoundly experienced, that is <<Acceleration>>.

Kuroyukihime's finger that was around the reality Haruyuki's chest slowly moved up and stopped at his neck.

"The heart with a thump beat, creates a quantum pulse signal that travels through the central nerve to the brain, that is the thought. If - that signal is overwritten at the neck by the Neuro Linker, and overclocked, what would happen?"

With a prickle of horror at his back, Haruyuki felt it.

"Thought will... accelerate?"

"That's right, for the Neuro Linker that is possible. Without causing any harm to the physical body or brain cells. Right now at this instant, our Neuro Linkers multiply the single heart beat clock, and send it to the brain with wireless quantum signal. Actually this rate, reaches 1000 times!"

"1000... times..."

Haruyuki could not do anything else other than repeat in blank amazement what he had been told. His paralyzed consciousness was shocked by Kuroyukihime's flowing voice.

"Thought sped up by 1000 times. That means, 1 second in reality equates to 1000 seconds, dividing that up, you experience 16 minutes and 40 seconds of time."

This is way beyond an F1 racer's speed. It's no longer technology anymore. It's equal to «Time Stop Magic».

However, what is basically possible with this wonderful phenomenon, while Haruyuki was thinking about that, Kuroyukihime looked like she noticed something and whispered 'Oops'.

"...?"

"Ah, sorry. I was engrossed in explanation, so we used up a bit too much time. I completely forgot, but the real you is going to be knocked flying soon."

"Arg..."

Haruyuki hurriedly moved his feet, heading to the front side of his blue frozen self.

For sure, while they talked for about 5 minutes (about 0.3 seconds in reality), Araya's fist had traveled quite a bit. Less than 50cm until it reaches Haruyuki's round cheek.

Araya's face... It was hard to believe it was made up from pictures of Social Cameras hidden in the ceiling. His violent excitement twisted his lips.

What is he so happy about? No, he should be happy. His fist is heading to me, who was futilely standing there with a hollow expression, exactly what they called a garbage character.

While murky thought passed in his mind, he turned toward Kuroyukihime.

"...Umm, this «Acceleration», how long will it continue?"

"In theory, it's unlimited. However the «Brain Burst» program has a set limit, your maximum accelerated experience is 30 minutes, which is about 1.8 second in real time."

At Kuroyukihime's cool reply, Haruyuki's pink pig's round eyes widen. If his real self is frozen like that for around 2 seconds, Araya's punch will surely move pass the remaining distance, and gradually sink into his nose.

"...I'll be beaten up!"

Thinking about his body flying slowly, Haruyuki shouted. However Kuroyukihime lightly laughed and added.



"Ah, don't worry. Of course, you can stop the accelerated state at any time."

"O, oh... is that so. Then, I can return to reality and avoid this punch too..."

"Easily. Fufu, this is «Acceleration»'s easiest to understand use. For situations where reaction speed that is not possible for your physical body, if you assess and consider it, then you can calmly deal with it after cancelling the accelerated state."

As she said, he had not been able to avoid the many beating. Because of his fear, he had not been able to see the path of Araya's punch and its target, but now inside «Acceleration» he can easily understand it.

After cancelling acceleration, moving left just 15cm would be fine. He swallowed his saliva while carving that into his head, then looked to Kuroyukihime to find the cancel command.

However, the black beauty said something outrageous before he could ask.

"However, don't avoid it. Be daringly knocked out here, Haruyuki-kun."

"Kn..."

While his pig nose trembled, Haruyuki shouted.

"N, no way! It will hurt."

"Which?"

"What...? Wh, which means..."

"I want to ask, is it your body or mind that will be hurt?"

The smile disappeared from Kuroyukihime's avatar. Without waiting for Haruyuki's reply, she appeared in front of him with her black high heels clicking.

Kuroyukihime bent her slender body that was about 50cm taller than Haruyuki's pig body, and peeked at his eyes from close range. He held his breath and stood still.

"This is not the first time you have been beaten up by the student named Araya."

"Y... yes."

He definitely did not want her to know that he was bullied, but why did he nod?

"Then, this student has not been punished thus far and there should be two reasons. The first of course is you accepting it meekly. And the other one is Araya's violence and blackmail area is strangely outside the Social Camera's view."

Certainly, the place where he was directly bullied was normally the roof's air exhaust shadow, behind the school and other places where students don't normally go to. However, that was not for avoiding people eyes, but to avoid cameras.

While Kuroyukihime showed a difficult expression, she stood up straight.

"...Unfortunately, this school's 2nd and 3rd years have the same kind of people like this guy. They have some kind of network, that share things like illegal applications that warn them of Social Camera zones. They will never show their tail in a camera zone... even this new guy should have been strictly ordered about that."

Kuroyukihime's ice like stare looked at the blue Araya's face once, and then her strangely calm voice continued.

"But, he's still a child. He lost control of himself from my earlier provocation, and used violence in this area full of cameras. Listen, this is your chance, Haruyuki-kun. It's easy to avoid this punch, but if you do that then Araya will leave us, and disappear from this place. The chance to give him the punishment he deserves, it will be long gone."

- And then, Araya will again make him hurt. That revenge, which will be more than the current half play, is something he can easily imagine. While his back shivered with a prickle, Haruyuki looked at his real self and Araya's fist nearing his face.

The bony right hand was sharp with rock-like points, getting hit with that will be painful enough to make him cry. This half year, he has experienced this pain more than he wanted. However -

What will really bleed is not his physical body, but his heart. It's his pride that was torn to shreds.

"...Umm."

With hesitation, Haruyuki asked Kuroyukihime.

"If I use «Brain Burst» well, can I win against this guy in fights?"

Her beautiful face without any expression stared straight at Haruyuki.

"- You would win. You now have power way beyond non-accelerated people, as a «Burst Linker». Without being hit a single time, you can hit as much as you like, if that is your wish."

My wish. There's no way I won't wish for that.

Elegantly avoiding Araya's karate punches and making his looks uglier than a pig. Crushing his nose, knocking out all of his front teeth and while he cries, begging on his knees, pull out his boastful golden hair.

Creek, while grinding his big teeth, he let out a sigh, Haruyuki tells Kuroyukihime in a trembling voice,

"...No, I will not do that. I will quietly get hit... since this is a rare chance."

"...Fu."

Kuroyukihime, with a satisfied smile, slowly nodded.

"Wise decision. Well, this will be the least damage and greatest effect. After «Acceleration» is cancelled, jump straight back to your right and don't forget to turn your face to the right to parry the fist."

"O... ok."



Haruyuki moved right behind his real self to check Araya's punch path. For sure, if he jumped while turning his face, even the karate punch's force will mostly be cancelled.

He moved his view to check where he will be jumping to. The left side has tables and to the right side behind has a large empty space. There were no obstacles all the way to the window looking out the central courtyard. Except for one person that is.

"Ah, no... this is no good. If I jump from here to there, I will crash into senpai's body."

The standing Haruyuki was only about one meter from the real Kuroyukihime who was sitting in a chair. If his huge body hit her, he won't know what would happen to her slender body.

However, the black dressed avatar just lightly shrugged.

"It doesn't matter, that way will be more effective. Don't worry, I'll dodge so I won't be hurt."

"...O, ok..."

That's true, if known beforehand, that is possible. He forced a nod.

"We will soon be out of time. Hurry and stand in your real self."

Pon, he was pushed from behind, Haruyuki took a step forward and his pig avatar overlapped his blue real self. Behind him Kuroyukihime also seemed to have sat down, her voice coming from a lower position.

“Ok, I will teach you the acceleration cancel command. Do your best - «Burst Out» !”

Burst Out!

Haruyuki took a deep breath and shouted.

Kiiin, with a jet engine like sound, something approaching from far away broke the surrounding silence. The blue world slowly returned to its original color.

In his left side view, the stopped Araya's fist moved bit by bit. From as slow as a snail, it gradually sped up, heading to Haruyuki's cheek.

Haruyuki did as he was told, while jumping to his right side behind with both legs, desperately turned his head to the right. The fiercely approaching fist touched his skin, and sunk in a bit -.

And then, the world returned to normal.

Waa, after he heard the noise from the surrounding, Haruyuki's left cheek felt the hit from the fist. He felt that the inside of his cheek hit his teeth, and his lips were torn. There was some bleeding, however compared to the many karate punches he ate before, this was definitely about half the pain.

However, at the same time Haruyuki's huge body showily flew in the air like in the movies.

Please dodge well! While praying, his back crashed into the chair behind him. A nice smell and a feeling of soft hair reached him.

The chair fell with a Gataan sound, and right after, an ominous sound was heard. Haruyuki's breath was knocked out of him when he fell on his back to the floor. While gasping for air, he desperately turned his head, trying to confirm the state of Kuroyukihime who was supposed to avoid the crash.

What his two wide eyes captured was, head reclining on the window, hands and legs spread out like a broken doll, a delicate shape with eyes closed.

Under the messed up front hair, on the almost see through white cheek, a line of blood flowed.

"Ah... ah."

While swallowing a scream, Haruyuki tried to stand up. But, before that -.

"Don't move!!"

From the still Direct Connect Linker, Kuroyukihime's thought voice hit Haruyuki's consciousness. Reacting to that, his body froze while in the fallen state and replied.

"Bu, but... Blood!!"

"No worries, it's just a small cut. I told you, we are aiming for the greatest effect. After this, Araya won't appear in front of you for a second time."

After being told, Haruyuki moved only his view from left to right side.

Araya, whose right fist was still held out straight, vacantly looked down at Haruyuki and Kuroyukihime. His face slowly lost blood as his thin lips trembled two or three times with a twitch.

In the silence that covered the lounge -.

"...Kyaaaaaa!!"

The surround table's female students' tremendous scream echoed.

Araya and his underlings A and B didn't resist when the male student council members captured them. The three people with slightly green faces and shaking legs were taken away by flustered teachers who arrived. Kuroyukihime was carried by the female student council members and headed straight to the hospital.

Haruyuki himself was lightly treated in the school infirmary, while the school doctor put a disinfection patch on him, the words that Kuroyukihime said to him right before pulling out the Direct Connect cable, still echo deep inside his ears.

"- Oops, almost forgot to tell you. Until you come to school tomorrow, absolutely do not remove your Neuro Linker. However, do not spend a single second in Global Connect. Listen, absolutely. Promise me."

He could not figure out what her true intention was for that directive. While he spent the afternoon two hours in the infirmary, a strange



dissociated feeling covered his whole body. The many things that happened to him in the two days between yesterday and today, he has no idea how to sort and absorb them.

However at the very least, he no longer has to worry about having his shoes missing from the shoe rack, or finding strange things in his shoes. He mechanically changed his indoor shoes to sneakers while leaving the school building and did as he was told to cut the net connection from the Neuro Linker.

What is the meaning for that? While thinking about that again he walked toward the front entrance of the school, at that moment.

"Haru."

The small voice reached his ears and Haruyuki abruptly stopped his legs.

Looking around, he noticed a small shape in the shadow of the school building that was dyed by the evening sun. While noticing his face tense up, he called that person's name.

"...Chiyu."

He did not forget the incident from yesterday and that he forcibly pushed "that" got pushed out of his consciousness instantly. 'Uwa, what should I do? No, I should apologize first, that's the only thing I can do', while he was panicking, Kurashima Chiyuri who was showing a difficult face stepped on the synthetic soft pavement of the school yard and approached.

"Ah... that is... yesterday's... err."

"Haru, I heard about what happened at lunch time."

Chiyuri said so, interrupting Haruyuki's disoriented words.

"What? Lunch... Ah, Ahh."

"You were hit by them, and flew really far... then, that injury? Are you ok?"

Chiyuri's face, with wrinkled large eyebrows, approached Haruyuki's as his left hand went to cover the patch near his mouth. 'No way, the flashy flight was done by myself', but he can't say that.

"Ye... Yeah, I am fine. It's just a little cut. I am not hurt anywhere else."

"...I see, that's good."

With her face still tense, but now with a slight smile, Chiyuri took a quick look at their surroundings. After the incident at lunch time, Haruyuki became the subject of talks at school and the students returning home from school stared at him without refrain.

"Then, let's go home together occasionally."

Chiyuri said with a hard sound, and started walking without waiting for him.

'Occasionally' she said. We haven't done that once since entering middle school, Haruyuki thought, but if he said no and ran away, it will be a repeat of yesterday's foolish actions. That's right, no matter what happens he has to at least apologize for yesterday's incident.

Chiyuri was walking in large steps that did not fit her height that Haruyuki had to run a bit to catch up to her as he went next to her, keeping a strange distance. Like that, they left the school entrance and walked onto the quiet sidewalk where only cars with in-wheel motors could be heard.

Normally, after he left school, he would automatically put the surrounding people, bikes, and cars in his virtual view as color symbols while walking with his eyes closed, but now that he's disconnected from Global Net, he cannot use navigation. Why would Kuroyukihime direct him to do that? While he was again thinking about that, Chiyuri who was on his right side said that name that nearly made him jump.

"Is it true that you Direct Connected with 2nd year's Kuroyukihime-san?"

"What!? Ho, how -"

'How did you know', he was going to say, but he realized that it would be like that. Compared to Araya's punch, that one incident would leave a bigger impact on the students.

"...Yeah, well..."

Without looking at Haruyuki's nod, Chiyuri's small lips became pointed and walked even faster. That expression was her showing the highest rank of displeasure, he knew that from being around her for so long. Why would she be like that? This time too he answered himself after thinking a bit. The idiot who knocked her handmade lunch down onto the hall, without apologizing went and did something strange with another girl... even if it wasn't Chiyuri, they would certainly be mad.

"Bu, but, there wasn't any strange meaning. That is, I was just copying her application."

It's October, his back was still filled with unpleasant sweat while he tried to explain. However Chiyuri's expression did not become peaceful, it seems no matter what, he has to apologize about the sandwich incident first! After deciding that, he earnestly tried to arrange words in his brain.

"In, instead of that, that is... yesterday's..."

Just as he finally said till there, a well carrying voice from the front made him swallow what he was going to say next.

"Hey, Haru, Chii-chan! What a coincidence, going home now?"

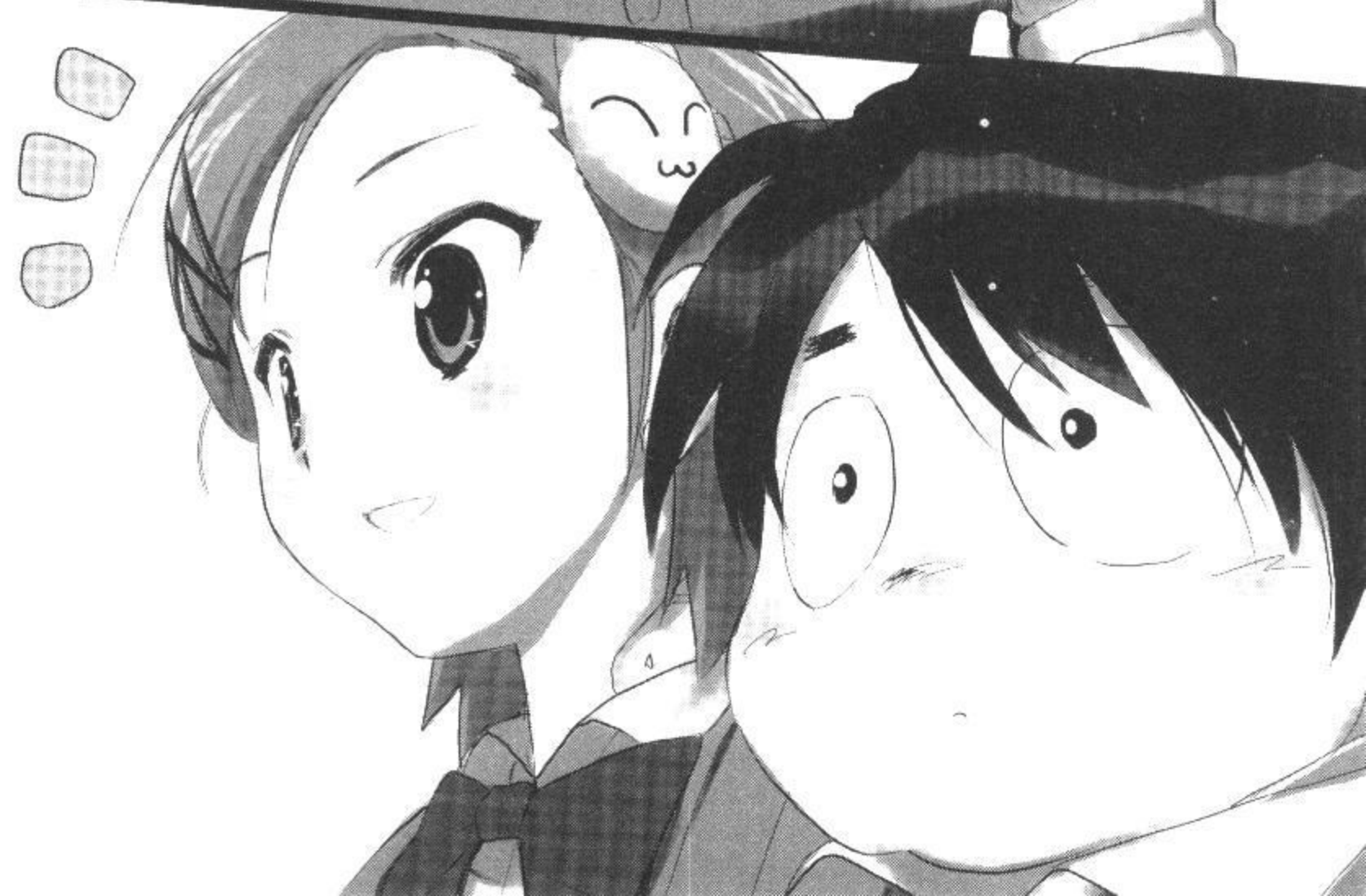
Chiyuri's legs abruptly stopped, and Haruyuki raised his face. On top of the seventh circular line escalator, a boy of the same age smiled with a raised hand.

His uniform was a blue-grey stand collar that's different from Umesato. His right hand held an old style black leather student bag, from his shoulder hung a shinaï<sup>[4]</sup> case that's used in kendo<sup>[5]</sup>. Slightly long hair with a clean feeling was split in the middle while the face below it has a fresh form that fit him more than anyone else. A refreshingly handsome man.

"Ah... Ta-kun."

After blinking a few times, Chiyuri smiled.





She was so displeased till now... While thinking that, for the 3rd time in a short period of time, 'Ah, that's right', Haruyuki whispered in his heart. - While walking with the annoying guy who dropped her sandwich, she met her boyfriend by accident.

Haruyuki and Chiyuri's childhood friend, Mayuzumi Takumu, with his shinai case swinging, approached with a short run, and faced Haruyuki with a cheerful smile.

"Hey, Haru! Long time no see."

"Hey, Taku. Long time... has it been?"

Haruyuki said while looking at Takumu's face that's 10cm higher than his.

"That's right, I haven't seen the real you in two weeks. After all, you don't go to mansion events."

"I went to the athletic meet."

Haruyuki replied with a wrinkled face, Takumu made a 'just like usual huh' smile.

The three of them were born in the same year in the complex high-rise mansion built in North Kouenji. However, just that reason won't get him friendly with a boy who had everything he did not have.

Ironically, Takumu was so good at studying that he entered a famous all grade escalator school in Shinjuku, thus Haruyuki can have a carefree

relationship with him because Takumu didn't have to see him once in a while being a target of bully in the local elementary school.

For Chiyuri who went to the same elementary school as him, he told (that is, begged) her not to tell Takumu about him being bullied. If he knew, then Takumu will save Haruyuki as he would call out the brats and beat them with his shinai.

However even if that stops the bullying, Haruyuki felt that he would then no longer be able to be friends with Takumu.

"Now that you mention it..."

While the three were walking, Haruyuki started a conversation. It was something he hardly did at school.

"I saw the previous city tournament video on the net. Taku is amazing, a champion even as a 1st year student."

"Luck, pure luck."

While scratching his head, Takumu made a ticklish like smile.

"The difficult guy disappeared in the semifinal. Also, Chii-chan came to cheer."

"Eh, m, me!?"

On the other side of Takumu, Chiyuri yelled with wide eyes.

"Why me? Not really, I was just watching in a corner..."

"Hahaha, what are you saying? 'Knock him out!', didn't you shout that loudly?"

Takumu laughed with a pleasant sound.

"Above that, you said you won't give me lunch if I lost. That was with a serious look right, Chii-chan?"

"Ah gee, I hear nothing! Nothing!"

While watching Chiyuri cover her ears and increase her walking speed, Haruyuki poked Takumu's body with his right elbow.

"I see, that is the reason why you were so motivated in the final round."

"Well, yeah, hahaha."

While laughing with Takumu -.

Certainly, this is great, Haruyuki thought.

His choice two years ago was not a mistake. Right now, they can talk like they did before.

He did not want this relationship to break apart.

At that time, like a counter, Takumu lightly said.

"Haru too, you ate Chii-chan's handmade lunch yesterday right?"

"Eh, no, that, that is."

While looking at Chiyuri's suddenly tense back, Haruyuki went into a light panic. 'Oh no, I haven't apologize yet, should I apologize now, or with email when I return home -'.

No, wait a minute.

How did Takumu know about that?

Haruyuki's legs became tangle and when he was about to fall, Takumu supported him while saying 'Oops'. However, without noticing that, his brain was getting hot due to repeated thinking.

That sandwich was made by Chiyuri because she knew that his lunch money was used by Araya's group. She was not good with cooking so why? He thought, it could not be from Takumu's advice right?

Is that was the case, then Chiyuri consulted with Takumu. That Haruyuki was being bullied. Otherwise, he would not have said that.

The inside of his head became white hot and Haruyuki unconsciously shook off Takumu's hand that was holding his right elbow.

"H, hey, Haru - ?"

To Takumu's questioning voice, Haruyuki could not face him. His wandering gaze met the frozen like expression in Chiyuri's eyes. Her lips moved, trying to say something, but Haruyuki shouted before she could.

"Ah... Sorry, there is a show I want to see! I will return first, Taku, see you again!"



He ran out like that. His leg got twisted and was about to fall many times, but Haruyuki ran earnestly.

Those two would probably consult again on how to save Haruyuki.

Even thinking about their conversation topic made him feel like his innards were being cut up. Even though a miracle-like happening made Araya disappear, if Takumu already knew about it, it would be too much even for irony.

Until he passed his mansion's entrance, and jumped in the elevator, he did not stop running even once.

That night, the dream he had was without a doubt the worst that he ever remembered having.

The elementary school brats, Araya and his underlings A and B, and other outlaw students whose names he doesn't know, took turns to appear and hurt him.

A little distance away, Chiyuri and Takumu watched while holding hands. More than the pain in his body, the pitying expression on their faces is what Haruyuki could not endure.

As the dream progressed, more viewers appeared. His mother appeared beside them, his father that left home long ago also appeared, along with the people living in the mansion and his classmates, the crowd of people looked down at him.

Their faces no longer had a pitying expression, but a scornful laughter. Many people pointed at the ugly and miserable Haruyuki and laughed.

Stop. I don't want to be here anymore.

While thinking that, he looked up at the dark sky far away, there was a shadow of someone there. With wings darker than night spread out, flying lightly like birds of a feather.

I want to go there too. Higher. Further.

I want to fly.

To beyond.

"- Is that your wish?"

## Chapter 3

Haruyuki opened his eyes with a sigh.

From the white light coming through the window, he could see that it was 6:30AM on the clock. He calculated that he had been sleeping for about 12 hours.

His entire body was full of sweat, and the remains of the nightmare made his skin feel slimy. Even so, he could not remember a single thing about his dream.

He dimly remembered Kuroyukihime's last words to him yesterday.

'Don't remove the Neuro Linker over night', was her directive, it can't be that this has some relation to his dream?

After he idly thought about that while taking a shower, he changed into his school uniform, then ate cereal and orange juice for breakfast in the kitchen alone. He put the dishes in the dishwasher then knocked on his mother's bedroom door for the one ritual before going to school.

"...I am going."

Saying that to the dim room, he heard a cracking voice say something unclear from the bed. She seemed to have drunk a lot last night.

While he waited for his mother to operate her cell phone to charge his Neuro Linker with 500 yen, she suddenly said with an irritated voice.

"Haruyuki, your Linker is disconnected."

Oh no, he put his hand to his neck. While feeling that he forgot something, he connected his Neuro Linker to the Global Net, soon with a 'chariin' sound effect, his electronic money balance increased.

"I am going."

He said it again, but there was no more reply. He softly closed the bedroom door, put on his sneakers at the entrance, and left his home.

He took the elevator to the first floor, while saying hello to residents he did not remember, he went through the front entrance.

The automatic door closed, he stepped into the mansion's front courtyard, just 3 seconds.

Bashiiiiii!! That sound reverberated in all of Haruyuki's brain.

What!?! «Accelerate»!?! However - why, by itself!?

While he held his breath, in front of his eyes in the familiar burning font, was a line of alphabet.

[HERE COMES A NEW CHALLENGER!!]

Where had he seen these words before. The words burnt out before he could remember, and on the top part of his view, something even more strange appeared.

In the center, a [1800] number. And to the left and right of that, blue bars extended. Under those is a small thin green bar which extended.

Finally, in his view's center, with flame letters - [FIGHT!!]

The number became 1799.

Not sure what to do, Haruyuki first looked at the four digit number that was counting down.

1800 seconds. 30 minutes. Where had he heard those numbers before. Oh yes - Kuroyukihime said it, «Accelerate» time limit was about this long of a number.

But this time, Haruyuki did not even say the 'B' of «Burst Link» that was the Acceleration start command. The world's color also, instead of monotone blue, it's full color. And, what's the meaning of 'Challenger' and 'Fight' anyway.

In order to get a handle on the situation, he desperately looked around, and soon noticed something.

The breezy October morning had disappeared without a trace, but the surrounding area was still within his memory, he was still in front of his home. The two lane street on the left side, the convenience store and office buildings on the side of the street, and if he turn around, he would see the high-rise mansion that he just left stand with the darkness.

However, the group of cars filling the street heading to Shinjuku, and the students going to school that filled the walkways, both had disappeared. Also, the street was cracked and had sinkholes here and there, the



guardrail and signs were bent, and the glass on buildings were flashily broken.

At the intersection a bit away, rubble was piled up like a barricade, and flames were flickering from a huge dome, like something was burning inside. The scares of destruction included Haruyuki's mansion home, concrete pillars were collapsed, the outer wall with a huge hole and other awful likeness.

He wanted to go back home right now to check out his house, with that motivation, he strolled a few steps and looked in the entrance from between the rubble.

Then, his eyes widen in amazement. The building's interior looks like a game's polygon building that was made inside his head, it looks like the inside of a grey flat surface box. No - not looks like. It is just that.

This is real but not reality. Haruyuki is now under «Accelerate» function, in a Full Dive in the virtual net, the surrounding scene are 3D images made from Social Camera video. Like the blue frozen world he saw yesterday in the lounge.

Even so, Haruyuki has never seen such a detailed virtual space. He could not see the pixel pitch. Each small rock near his feet was made with overwhelming detail.

If it's like this, what has became of his body, Haruyuki looked down.

He thought he was going to see his familiar pink pig, but -.

"...Wh ...What is this."

Amazed, he involuntarily leaked a sound.

What came into his view were legs, chest and arms that were slender like wires, a body like polished silver. It was like a robot - however, it did not have the fighting image of games or anime.

He hurriedly put his hand to his face, but instead of a nose or mouth, his fingers slid on something hard like the shape of a helmet. He took a moment to look around, and saw a cracked window on the front wall of an apartment building on the other side of the street from the mansion, with 'cachin cachin' foot steps he ran there.

The shape reflected by large glass was a truly full-body metallic robot. The body was slender and small, only the streamlined head was unusually large. To say it in one sentence - it's a very small-fry look.

At least his forehead should have horns... or both eyes shine with golden beacon.

While he was complaining to the unknown avatar designer, at that time.

Behind his reflection in the glass, on the other side of the street, a few wriggly human shadows were seen.

Shocked, he crouched his metallic body and turned around. Unknown since when they appeared, three shapes stood under a destroyed convenience store. Since they were surrounded by darkness, he could

only see their silhouette, but each of them were much bigger than Haruyuki.

The shadows seemed to be facing each other and were talking. Haruyuki involuntarily tried to listen.

"...Somehow, a strangely victim-like guy."

"I don't remember his name, a newbie?"

"But he is metallic color. Maybe he has some ability?"

Those guys - were not NPCs<sup>[6]</sup>.

Haruyuki felt that directly. That manner and speech pattern, without a doubt they are human instead of programs.

But this place was the «Accelerate»'s virtual net. That means they are, like Haruyuki and Kuroyukihime, people who installed Brain Burst, this would be how it is.

Then, they would know what this situation is. First let's ask those three about the circumstances, after deciding that, he timidly stepped out onto the road and got as far as the white center line.

Suddenly, he felt someone else looking at him. He stopped his feet and turned that way.

There. More than three people. Unknown where they appeared from, on roof of ruin buildings, on top of rubbles, all around were strange

silhouettes watching Haruyuki. However they did not seem to approach closer, just - yes, a feeling of waiting for something.

Haruyuki was bewildered, he moved his view back to the center of the road. The count on top of his view has decreased to 1620. The bars to the left and right of that number had not changed -.

No, he did not notice it until now, under the left and right bars were lines of small alphabet.

The left side read as «Silver Crow». And the right side was «Ash Roller».

This screen structure, he felt very familiar with it.

Haruyuki had a strong sense of déjà-vu as he thought that.

This is not something new - over 30 years before Haruyuki was born, near the end of the 19xx era in Japan, it dominated amusement centers, a kind of game program. And recently, something he saw triggered this feeling. That was...

Haruyuki who was standing there searching through his memory, jumped as an explosion suddenly sounded behind him.

"...!?"

He lost his balance while turning around and fell down on his rear, in front of his eyes was a huge towering silhouette.

It was a bike. Even so, it was not a familiar motor drive type... illegal since long ago, an internal combustion engine nestled in the gut, from which a 'Doddoddo' heavy vibration sound came.

The front fork was ridiculously long, and the tire it connected to was jokingly fat. From the rugged grey tread, a faint burnt odor drifted over.

Haruyuki looked up, behind the excessively curved handle, his gaze fearfully captured the figure of the rider sitting on top of the leather seat.

Full body covered in black leather with tacks, two feet with boots spread apart, and both arms crossed at the chest. Head too covered in a black helmet, the face shield was a skeleton like showy thing.

From inside, a creaking voice appeared, Haruyuki listen while dumbfounded.

"A long time no see «End of Century» stage, Luckkyy~"

From one of his crossed hands, an index finger wriggled left and right.

"You as an opponent are a shiny newbie. Mega Luckkyy - !"

The skeleton rider lifted his right boot and put it on the handle bar, doing a skillful thing. At that moment, 'Dobobaroruooooon!' A roaring wail sounded, and Haruyuki jumped up again.

No matter how he sees it, this is not a friendly opponent. Instead, if his previous thoughts were right, this is a «Fighting Stage» - and this rider is

- .



"U... Uwa..."

Haruyuki inched back, and turned.

"Uwa -"

With the robot's small legs crackling, he ran desperately.

"Whahahaha!! Run away, run away!!"

Another engine roar sound from behind him, and sounds of tire screeching continued - just one second later, his back suffered a huge hit and he felt sharp pain, Haruyuki flew high up into the dark night.

At the same time, at the top left of his view, «Silver Crow»'s blue bar shrank.

After seeing that, Haruyuki thought as he spun in the air, 'Ah so it really is this'.

That is, this is a «Fighting Game», he was a newbie that doesn't know left from right, and his opponent was a veteran player that knows how to win.

There's no way he can win.

"Hahaha, you got hunted right away. That was because you did not stick to our promise, boy."

Lunch time.

Same as yesterday, Haruyuki was Direct Connected to Kuroyukihime in the lounge, under watchful eye of the healing patch below her front hair, she shook her head and skillfully laughed with thought only. Her injury, which showily bled, seemed to have left only a scratch. All his speech for thanks and apology was stopped with a wave of her right hand.

"It's... not a laughing matter. I thought I was going to die... Well, it was my bad for carelessly connecting my Neuro Linker to the Global Net..."

Kuroyukihime looked pleasantly at the complaining Haruyuki, and took the tea cup from the table and put it to her lips. The shrimp-au-gratin that was next to the cup was left intact, it put out hot steam just like the large pork curry in front of Haruyuki.

The student council members sitting at the same table were already moving their chopsticks or spoons, Haruyuki's stomach was making pathetic sounds, but it seems Kuroyukihime's lecture, in other words preaching will not be ending any time soon.

"- But well, this way, it saves me some explaining. The lesson fee was a bit high, but you already understand right?"

"Understand... what?"

"The identity of «Brain Burst» program. It's not a grand conspiracy, just a - "

Haruyuki nodded, and continued with what the words should be from where Kuroyukihime left off.

"Just a fighting game. Using reality as a stage for encounter fights. It's outrageous..."

"Fufu, it sure is an outrageous talk that caused false alarm."

"Using the tremendous technology of thought «Acceleration», and what did they do with it, a fighting game! That's a genre that was thrown away 30 years ago!"

Hearing that, Kuroyukihime tilt her head to think a bit, then gave an ironic smile.

"Hmm, that way of saying is a bit wrong. Haruyuki-kun, we Burst Linkers do not «Accelerate» just to play fighting games. It's the other way, we fight to be able to continue using «Accelerate». We are forced, that is this program's unpleasant part."

"That... what does it mean?"

"Un... what's ahead, is better explained in practice. Go into «Accelerate» mode."

"Oh, ok..."

Haruyuki cut his attachment to the large curry, sat up straight in his chair, and shouted the Accelerate command silently.

Burst Link!

Bashii, that sound hit his body and consciousness, the surrounding student's movements stopped. At the same time, many colors disappeared, replaced with a translucent blue.

Kuroyukihime in front of him stopped too, but soon from the tidy uniform, like a spirit leaving the body, a bewitching black clothed avatar stood up. Haruyuki's pink pig avatar too got down from the chair, without looking at his real round self, moved forward.

"Then... what do I do?"

"Your view's left side, are there any new icons added?"

He moved his focus as told, and for sure in the line of application icons, he noticed a burning B mark new icon. He raised his left hand and clicked that.

"That is the Fighting game «Brain Burst»'s main menu. You can check your status and fighting history, and search the surrounding for Burst Linkers to challenge to a fight. Push the Matching button."

Haruyuki nodded then clicked the button at the very bottom of the menu. Immediately a new window opened, after an instant of the 'Searching...' display, a name list is shown.

Even saying so, there were only two names in the list. The one he saw this morning, his own «Silver Crow» and - the other one. «Black Lotus».

Haruyuki has no doubt that is Kuroyukihime's Burst Linker name, he raised his face a little to confirm. As expected, the black swallowtail butterfly avatar lightly nodded and said.

"Now, we are disconnected from the Global Net and connected to the school local network, the list is just you and me - or should be."

"Yes... Black Lotus-san."

'Beautiful name', and, 'fits you perfectly', of course he did not actually say that out loud, all that happened was his pig nose trembling.

"Ok. Then, click my name, and go into a fight."

"Wh... Whattt!?"

"We don't have to actually fight. Just let the time run out and end it as a draw is all."

With a light bitter smile, Kuroyukihime urged him on.

In an era where tens of thousands of people connect to have a huge battle in the same field is not uncommon, and now one on one, while thinking that, he clicked the name in the list, and from a new pop-up menu selected [DUEL]. And from the YES/NO dialogue that showed up next - [YES].

Instantly, the shape of the world changed again.



From the blue stopped lounge, all the students disappeared. The pillars and tables, while color returned to them, showed decay like it was due to age, and the glass has thick dust caked on them.

And then the sky, was dyed with a deep orange color. A dry wind blew from somewhere, moving the unknown name grass that grew here and there on the floor.

The familiar 1800 number is clearly carved at the top of his view. Blue bars extend to the left and right, and at last - the burning word [FIGHT!!].

"Oh... «Twilight» stage. We pulled out a rare one."

Beside Haruyuki who was looking around, Kuroyukihime's voice sounded.

"The stage's attributes are: burns well, quickly destroyed, and unexpectedly gloomy."

"Ah, oh..."

While nodding, Haruyuki checked out his own body. Unknown since when, his pink pig was changed to the slender silver robot.

Then, what would Kuroyukihime's shape be, while thinking that he moved his view, what he saw was the same black dress avatar without a single change.

"So that is your duel avatar. «Silver Crow», nice name. Color is nice too. I like the form too."

Kuroyukihime extended her hand, and patted the slippery silver head.

This sure sense of touch, Haruyuki again realized that this place does not have the «Contact Forbidden» kind of code to protect children, and that this is the real virtual reality.

"Th, thank you... but this looks like a small fry. A re-make, is not possible... right. Who designed and named this anyway? In the first place, what is a duel avatar?"

"As the name says, it's an avatar for fighting only. - Last night, you had a very long and scary dream right?"

"...Yes."

He did not remember the contents, but the feeling that it was a very bad nightmare was left behind. He involuntarily rubbed his robot's two slender arms with his hard hands.

"That's caused by the program accessing your deep image. Brain Burst uses the owner's desire, fear and obsession to chop and mix, creating the duel avatar."

"My... image. Fear and... desire."

While whispering, Haruyuki looked down at his body again.

"This... small, weak and smooth body is my wish? Well, it's true that I usually thought about being more skinny but... If it's like this, I want to be a bit more Heroic looking..."

"Hahaha, it's not that simple. What the program reads and uses, is not the ideal but the inferiority complex. In your case, you should feel lucky that your pink pig-kun was not used for your duel avatar just like that. Although, I like that too."

"S... stop it. I don't like it."

He should make a new black knight avatar for school net use, while thinking that he asked.

"Then, does this mean senpai's school avatar is also made by Brain Burst? That is a symbol of senpai's inferiority complex? But it's so pretty..."

"No..."

With a light shadow in her eyes, Kuroyukihime frowned.

"This is made by myself with the editor. I... for reasons right now, have sealed my original duel avatar. I will tell you the reason later, when the time comes."

"Sealed...?"

"Unfortunately, my duel avatar is ugly. Ugly to the extreme. That's not the reason for sealing it... well, never mind about me."

Kuroyukihime shrugged, and soon returned to her normal mysterious expression. Her white hand again caressed Haruyuki's helmet head.

"This morning, another Burst Linker fought you in the Global Net, and you used your just made avatar to fight. Then you were completely beaten and lost. Is that right?"

"...U, well, that's it exactly. A perfect loss."

"The result display after the fight, did you properly see it?"

Haruyuki unwillingly remembered the «Fighting Stage» he had been in before coming to school. In that dark ruin, a skeleton helmet rider on a vulgar bike hit and bashed him flying, his HP gauge disappeared very quickly.

With a pathetic sound effect, the words [YOU LOSE] appeared in front of him, then -.

"I am pretty sure... My name and Level 1 was shown, and then a strange number came out. Burst... Point, maybe. That decreased from 99 to 89."

"Good, you remembered well. Burst Points! That is why we go stand on the ruthless battle field."

Kuroyukihime said that like a shout, she walked a few steps toward the glass window, then turned around. The parasol held in her two hands went 'thud'! She stabbed it into the floor, small broken pieces of flagstone flew up.

"Burst Points, namely, are the number of times we can «Accelerate». One Acceleration will decrease your points by 1. Right after installation the

starting point is 100, but yesterday in the lounge you Accelerated once, so your points decreased by 1. And earlier, you used another 1 point."

"Arg... How do you charge that up? Don't tell me it use real money to charge?"

"Wrong."

Kuroyukihime drastically denied.

"There is only one way to increase Burst Point, winning a «Fight». When you win, if it was the same level fight, you gain 10 points. However losing means lose 10 points. Like what happened to you this morning."

Kuroyukihime turned her face to look at the evening sky past the window, and continued to whisper.

"«Accelerate» is very powerful. Winning at fights is a simple matter of course, getting full marks on a test, a big win in some kind of gamble or sports is easy too. That last summer Koushien<sup>[7]</sup>, the new record holder for home runs, a first year high school student, is a high level Burst Linker."

"...Wha..."

To the dumbfounded Haruyuki, she threw a somewhat sad look.

"Thus, once we tasted the forbidden nectar, we can only forever continue to «Accelerate». For that we need Burst Points, so we can only continue to fight forever."

"...Wa ...Wait a minute please."



What, that genius power hitter is a Burst Linker.

No that's not it - Kuroyukihime's speech, isn't there something strange about it?

Haruyuki desperately thought, then opened his mouth.

"Ah... well, earlier you said fighting win is 10 up and lose is 10 down. That means... there is also point decrease from «Accelerate», so the total points from all Burst Linkers can only decrease. That means, the points of people weak at fights will certainly become zero... What happens when they became like that...?"

"You are certainly quick at comprehension. It's simple. «Brain Burst» will be lost."

Kuroyukihime's dark eyes that had a burning like color looked straight at Haruyuki.

"The program will automatically uninstall, and it cannot be installed a second time. Even changing the Neuro Linker is useless, since the program knows the specific brain waves of each Burst Linker. The people who lost all their points, will not «Accelerate» anymore."

The cold feeling voice told him that, and she added.

"New people like you enter the battle, so the pie won't just decrease. Even though now, the trend seems to be on slight decline."

However Haruyuki almost did not hear a single word of the added speech.

"Brain Burst will be... lost."

Having just tasted the power of «Accelerate» two or three times, Haruyuki's back froze just thinking about it. It was not from not being able to Accelerate anymore. For Haruyuki, it meant losing his only connection to Kuroyukihime who was originally living in another world.

Once again, he realized how heavy that 10 points hunted by the skull rider was.

"Then... what will you do, Haruyuki-kun."

Haruyuki raised his face at this whispered question.

"Will I do...?"

"You can still go back now. To the normal world without «Accelerate» or «Fighting». The idiots who bullied you won't appear again, this I guarantee as a student council member."

"...I ...I..."

'- Accelerate or Brain Burst does not matter. Just, I don't want to be separated from you.'

Of course he could not say that. In exchange, he held his silver fists tight and answered.

"...I, still have things I need to pay back to senpai."

"Oh?"

"You gave me Brain Burst, and pulled me out of that hell. The reason for that is not to steal my starting 100 points, I understand that at least. If it is like this, there isn't a really good way to say this. ...Then, you should want me for something. Checking my squash game high score, going to the trouble of lecturing me on Accelerate from the beginning, there is a goal. Isn't that right?"

"...Hmm. Accurate reasoning."

The lightly smiling, beautiful avatar looked straight at Haruyuki's silver face.

"I... I am truly not someone who should talk to senpai like this. I am uncool, fat, a crybaby, have a grudge against my only two friends and am jealous of them, run and escape quickly, a really no-good person. The lowest."

'What am I saying', while thinking that, Haruyuki could not stop the words flowing out. He was saved by the fact that his avatar's face is like a mirror without expressions.

"Even so, that Kuroyukihime-senpai talked to me and Direct Connected with me, that I understand was because I am somewhat good with games, and there should not be any other reason, I would not be unhappy with just that, that is."

'What am I really trying to say, I should sort it better then say it, ah now is the time to use Accelerate, no, I am already in Accelerate mode.'

Already falling into panic mode, Haruyuki could only expose what's inside of him.

"That's why... why I want to answer senpai's expectations. Your... mercy, I want to fully repay that. I don't know what I can do, if you are in need now, I will do whatever I can. That's why I... will not uninstall Brain Burst. I will fight... as a Burst Linker."

'What's that, I should have just said the last part! What did I say anyway.'

After he finished spilling out all the words, Haruyuki felt embarrassed and shrunk his slender avatar body, cowering.

'Anyway, aren't you mistaken about something, you self-conscious guy.' He was prepared for her to think like that, right after, a simply released speech shook his hearing.

"Mercy... don't use this kind of word."

He looked up slightly and saw the most feeling expressed in a face he'd seen in the past few days.

"I am only a foolish and powerless middle school student. Standing in the same place as you, a human breathing the same air. In this stage, we are equal Burst Linkers. You are the one who is making the distance. These mere two virtual meters, does it seem that far to you?"

She silently extended her white right hand.

It's far.

The inside of Haruyuki's chest murmured.

'To be in the view of someone like you who has everything, you won't understand how dreadful it is for someone like me. I am willing to be a servant. To move as a piece under your command, just that is unexpected happiness for me. If I take your hand here, I would have expectations that I am not allowed. Later certainly, it will be double the regret paid for that poisonous expectation.'

Same for Chiyuri and Takumu. With those two, he is satisfied with being happy bosom friends. Just without pity and sympathy, he absolutely did not wish for a position beyond that, but...

The sound leaked from his mouth, was as dry as the wilted tree in the virtual twilight.

"...Senpai saved me from hell. That... is my whole life worth of happiness. I do not wish for anything beyond, absolutely."

"...I see."

As she murmured, Kuroyukihime lowered her hand.

A hard and heavy silence took over the stage. What broke that, was a sound he thought had not changed from before.

"I gladly accept your determination. It is true right now I have a bit of a troublesome problem. I need your help to resolve that."

Haruyuki took a small breath and nodded.

"Sure, if it's something I can do, anything. What should I do?"

"First, learn the way to «Fight». Click your name displayed below your life gauge. Open the «Install», you can view all the commands for your Duel Avatar's set of normal and special skills."

"Sp... special skill?"

He stopped his extending hand and asked while repeating.

"Yes. When the Duel Avatar is created, the program will spread a certain number to different parameters according to the potential avatar's attributes. The superior attack type, the hard defense type, and the one special skill make a turning point kind of peak type too. But, the golden rule is that Duel Avatars of the same level have about the same total potential. Your first fight was a crushing defeat, that does not mean your opponent was too strong. Just that you don't know how to fight."

That bike person, «Ash Roller», was the same level 1 as Haruyuki. He thought that was an overwhelming opponent, but in truth, he has the same fighting power as «Silver Crow»?

If that is the case, then this small and slender robot avatar should certainly have a tremendous special skill. Haruyuki excitedly extended his silver finger, and pressed his own name.

With a sound effect, a half transparent window opened.

A simple humanoid animation showed the movements, to the right is shown skill names.



First one, lower the waist and make a fist, do a thrust motion. Normal skill «Punch».

Second one. Pull back right leg, do a kick in front motion. Normal skill «Kick».

And lastly, special skill - cross both arms, open them wide left and right, thrust the head out with a swing, the name is «Head Butt».

Just those. Nothing else.

"...Err."

Haruyuki murmured while dumbfounded.

"Normal skill Punch and Kick... and special skill is just Head thrust."

"Oh?"

Kuroyukihime who heard that, put her right index finger to her chin, and tilted her neck. He thought that her expression did not change, but he could not keep watching, so he cowered. Just thinking of the disappointment flowing in her dark eyes, made his whole body heat up.

He unconsciously moved his mouth.

"No, that's fine. This is within expectations. This avatar looks like it is full of uselessness. I am sorry it's not what you hope for. It's ok, you can just leave me alone. Just think of it as a missed lottery."

"You... fool!!!"

That shook his body, Haruyuki raised his face. Unknown since when, Kuroyukihime was right in front of him, her eyebrows raised, and her burning eyes looked down at him.

"I won't say anything about your way of living, since I am just a similar middle school student. However in regards to Brain Burst, I am over six years your senpai. I already said it before, different Duel Avatars have equal potentials. Have you already forgotten?"

"B... but, my only skills are Punch, Kick, and Head thrust..."

"Then, there is a strength to supplement that somewhere for sure."

Her stare softened a bit, Kuroyukihime continued like admonishing him.

"That Duel Avatar was born from your heart. What happens if you don't believe in it?"

'The person I do not believe in the most, is myself.'

While he murmured in his chest, Haruyuki nodded.

"...I am sorry. I will believe... not sure about myself, just your words."

Hearing that, Kuroyukihime's face twisted slightly - maybe it was just a bitter smile - Haruyuki's shoulder relaxed slightly.

"For you, before learning how to fight, there is something else you must learn. Strength is..."

For a little while. Her slight bitter smile was mixed with some pathetic expression.

"Strength is, not just a word meaning the result of a victory. I wasted a lot of time to learn that. And when I learned it, it was much too late."

The true meaning of her quietly whispered words, Haruyuki could not comprehend. When he tilted his head about to ask, without giving him the time to do it, Kuroyukihime suddenly turned around.

"Hmm, it's almost time."

When he looked, the 1800 second time count only had 20 second left.

"Then, the next lecture will be a practice lesson."

"Huh... what...? What does that mean...?"

At the puzzled Haruyuki, Kuroyukihime showed an fearless smile.

"Of course, you are going to get it back. Your 10 points."

Right after, the Draw result displayed, then the «Fight» ended, and «Accelerate» canceled.

At the moment they returned to the real lounge, without giving him a chance to speak, Kuroyukihime pulled out the Direct Connect cable and took it back.

"Well! Let's eat, Arita-kun. The food is getting cold."

With a smile, she picked up a small spoon from the table. Without any choice, Haruyuki too pulled the curry rice plate in front of him close. Even though he experienced over 30 minutes of time since he took it from the counter, it still had warm steam rising, his stomach growled.

From the surrounding tables, the same displeased stares like yesterday focused on him, he thought about bringing it to the cafeteria corner to eat, but lost to his empty stomach. After he ate three big mouthfuls, he heard an upperclassman at the same table talking to Kuroyukihime, that made his throat tighten.

"Hime<sup>[8]</sup>, isn't it about time you tell us? We are about to die from curiosity. How should we comprehend your relationship with this person?"

He looked up, and saw that the one who spoke was the fluffy hair student council member he saw yesterday. She should be the 2nd year secretary.

"Hmm."

Kuroyukihime put her spoon on the side of the gratin plate, elegantly held up her tea cup, and looked like she thought for a bit. The surrounding students all quieted down.

"Bluntly speaking, I confessed, and he rejected me."

Screams and shouts of consternation filled the world.

Haruyuki held the spoon in his mouth, took his curry, and escaped by running.

"Y... you there!!"

The afternoon next two hours, Haruyuki passed them while being showered with needle like stares, he went behind the right side of

Kuroyukihime who was heading to the school gate and complained in a low voice.

"What were you thinking!! I will be bullied again!! I will absolutely be bullied again!!"

"That was a majestic proclamation."

While laughing, Kuroyukihime continued with a wise look.

"I only said the truth. Also, you were not altogether bad yourself."

While saying so she manipulated her virtual desktop, and made a flipping her finger tip motion. From the local net he instantly received a file, an icon lit up in his view. When he clicked it, a large picture opened up in front of his eyes.

It's a picture of him with curry spoon in his mouth, a blankly stupid expression shown on his face.

When he saw that, Haruyuki shouted.

"Ugyaa!!"

He instantly threw the file into the trash can.

"Wh, when did you take this field of view screen shot! Even sleight of hand has a limit!!"

"What, just a souvenir."

While bantering like that, the surrounding stares with real killing power was focused on Haruyuki. He shrunk his neck like usual, but after all he could not hide behind Kuroyukihime's slender body.

"Hold your chest a bit higher. In this school, there are not many males that rejected me, on the other hand you were the only one."

"So, when did I do that!"

"Saying it like that is so mean. I might get hurt again. ...Well, instead of that."

With 'instead of that' words Kuroyukihime put the question on pending, she changed her expression and said in a low voice.

"When we leave the front gate, your Neuro Linker will connect to the Global Net. Any Burst Linker in this «Suginami 3rd Battle Area» can force you into a fight. Before you are challenged, Accelerate, look for «Ash Roller» in the matching list and challenge him."

"What... area? Is there a limit in the area where fighting is possible?"

To Haruyuki's question, Kuroyukihime made a small nod.

"That's right. Even if you fight someone on the other side of Tokyo, 30 minutes will pass before you can meet. ...Eventually, you can go to a multi-person, unlimited connection, group-use battle field, but that is something beyond level 4. Right now just concentrate on the fight in front of you."



With a slightly sharper sound, the lecture is nearing end.

"I will tell you now, if you lose you can not instantly re-match, you can only challenge the same person once a day. I will go in the gallery, unfortunately I can not help you. ...Don't make such a dejected face, if you fight like I wrote in the mail, you won't lose."

"O... ok."

He swallowed while nodding. He copied and pasted the text mail he received during the sixth period into his brain.

"This is your real debut fight, «Silver Crow». Good Luck."

With a push at his back, Haruyuki stepped into the walkway blowing with the dust of battle.

## Chapter 4

The battle field was again the late night ruin and burning «End of Century» stage.

Haruyuki shrunk his small avatar and hid on the walkway above the Seven Rings<sup>[9]</sup>.

He did not notice it in the previous battle since he was panicking too much, in his view other than remaining time and HP, a small water color triangle is shown. It is a guide cursor displaying the general direction of the enemy.

The triangle pointed straight north at the wide road, shaking slightly. That means the enemy, «Ash Roller», was not staying still somewhere far away, he was probably coming closer in a direct line in a hurry. The cursor did not show him the distance.

Haruyuki reviewed the the attack strategy mail that Kuroyukihime sent him in his brain.

[The result from considering your information is that Ash Roller has two big weak points. First, when he moves, he makes a lot of loud noises.]

That is true. The previous time, if he actually noticed his surroundings, he would have heard the rumbling noise of the gasoline engine from far away.

This time he won't be surprised by the same thing again. He held his breath and listened intently. And - .

...He's coming!

The cursor was shaking slightly like usual, but an unmistakable heavy low tone reached Haruyuki's hearing. In the Seven Rings empty of people, Ash Roller seemed to be roaring around with engine on full throttle. He must be really happy, if he rode a bike in the real world, he would be going slowly daily in that congestion in a low power electric scooter. And his challenger, was again his perfect win newbie from this morning.

'But this time, at the very least it won't be a perfect win. Since the first attack will be mine.'

Haruyuki ground his inner teeth and stared at the water colored cursor.

It was pointed straight south like usual, he could tell the enemy approaching by the engine sound. But, it's not the same for the other person. In a straight line high speed approach, the only time he would notice the cursor change direction, is at the instant when they cross.

While laying on his stomach on the floor of the overhead walkway, Haruyuki intently looked down at the direction of Kouenji station. The explosive sound became louder, to the point that he could even feel the vibrations in his body - .

Saw it.

Ash Roller had his headlights off of course, but Haruyuki for sure saw the red flames reflect off the chrome. The time that they will cross is 15 - no, 10 seconds.

There is only one chance for a surprise attack. However, Haruyuki's weapons, are normal skills Punch and Kick only. That is, he can only jump down from the overhead walkway and hit with his body.

'Scary. This is not something I can do.'

To the self that thought that for an instant, he cursed in his heart.

'Don't say stupid things. Right now I am not the overweight 13 year old Arita Haruyuki, I am the Burst Linker «Silver Crow». And then this is not the real world but the virtual game field. It's the world where I have been putting most of my time and passion thus far. Rather, it can be said that this is my real world.'

'Then, I won't be defeated. Instead - this time will be my happy win against this skeleton person!'

"Uwaaaa!"

With that shout, Haruyuki stood up, in one breath climbed over the metal railing, and jumped.

For a biker approaching at over 100kph, to be able to land a kick on him from a high above drop, is probably a performance harder than Haruyuki thought it would be.

However, for Haruyuki who can continually hit virtual squash balls that are even harder to see, Ash Roller's skeletal helmet is a huge target. He extended his right leg in the air, stabilizing his path with both hands extended, and flew forward like a silver arrow.

"...Owa!?"

He noticed that cry leaked from beneath the skeletal face face-guard.

However at that time, the heel covered by silver armor scored a direct hit at the center of the skeleton.

Bakyaaaaan!! With that tremendous impact sound, the face-guard cracked radially. The rider's head bend back with a crunch sound, Haruyuki slid past above that face, fell to the asphalt road and tumbled around.

His eyes were spinning for a moment, but he soon raised his head to check behind him.

The bike, with sparks flying out the front and rear brake rotors, flew off to the right side, it stopped when it crashed into the pile of rubble at the side of the road. The rider's body, from reaction to the kick, hit his face on the tank, at the same time, the engine stopped with a sad sound.

"...Di, did it."

While whispering and holding his right hand in a fist, Haruyuki checked both of their HP gauges.

For Silver Crow, with his fall damage from a high place, he had lost about 5% HP. As for Ash Roller, he had suffered large damage, with the flying kick and crashing dealing big damage, his gauge lost about 20%, and it became a slight purple color.

It can be said that his first attack was a perfect success. But in detail, it was not a critical hit that can kill.

Haruyuki stood up, his eyes found a five story building to the left side of the road and he started running that way. From what Kuroyukihime said, the «End of Century» stage's main fight area is on the road, so you cannot enter the buildings. However, the outside of the buildings was not limited by this.

On the building's wall was a half collapsed emergency escape stairs put there like an afterthought. Haruyuki jumped on it, and climbed all the way to the top of the building in one go.

[As for Ash Roller's 2nd weakness. That is, his duel avatar's potential is mostly put into his bike. The rider's fighting ability should be almost zero. So first you attack to damage him, then move to the top of a building that the bike cannot climb to.]

That was the battle plan Kuroyukihime gave him.

As long as his opponent is damaged more than himself after he climbed to the top, all he has to do is wait for time up to win. Even if the rider got off the bike to climb to the top, he can just use Punch or Kick to easily pummel him.



From the looks, it might be said to be a cowardly battle plan. However, Haruyuki actually loves this kind of clever win with attacking weak points. It can be said to be his nature in games.

For now from the top of the roof, Haruyuki wanted to return Ash Roller's laughter from this morning in multiples, so he moved to the edge.

Looking down, he can see that the crashed bike's engine has finally been re-ignited. With the idling sound like someone breathing hard shaking, the body of the bike was pulled out of the rubble.

While he was thinking about how to provoke him, Haruyuki heard some whispering sound.

"Ah, that small kid did well."

"A big difference from this morning. Wonder who the «Parent» is."

Looking that way, from the roof of the building a little away, were silhouettes sitting on top of a huge water tank looking down this way. The «Gallery».

Since Burst Linker «Duel» is only a maximum 1.8 seconds real time, there won't be enough time to accelerate once a fight starts. So, for Burst Linkers of interest and friends who registered the name, once that person starts a fight, he will also automatically accelerate and dive into the battle field to watch, there seems to be that function. For that purpose, no Burst Point is expended.

Looking around, Haruyuki can see shadows here and there on rooftops and roads. They should not have marked him, so they must be Linkers that are checking out Ash Roller.

However, one person in that gallery should have registered Silver Crow. Of course, it would be Kuroyukihime's «Black Lotus».

Now, where is she? While he was looking around, one of the two sitting on top of the water tank waved to him.

"If you win this duel, I will register you too. Good luck, boy."

"Well, it won't be this easy I think."

To the other one's speech, Haruyuki replied in his mind.

'Unfortunately, it won't be too exciting development from here on, it will probably time up.'

He shrugged a bit with that feeling, and looked back to the road.

Then, he froze in consternation.

Far down looking like a pea, Ash Roller's bike's front wheel stood against the building's wall.

Wai... wh, what are you trying to do?

The reply, was a high pitched furious shout.

"Don't... be so full of yourself, baldy!! You dare to step on my V-twin sound!!"

Bogaaaaan!! The engine roared, and the chrome exhaust put out flames.

Right after, the huge American bike started up the building wall at a blistering pace.

"Aaa..."

Haruyuki's eyes bulged out under his silver face plate, he retreated back a step - just two seconds after that. Within the span of an arm held out, with loud noise and burning stench, the steel frame appeared.

Baruooooon! With that high pitched engine sound, the bike that flew about two meters above the roof's edge, landed right in front of Haruyuki's eyes.

"Uwawawa!!"

He hurriedly back dashed a few more steps.

With a loud crashing sound, the grey rear tire hit the rooftop concrete. The concrete cracked radially, and some fragments hit Haruyuki's armor. At that moment, he noticed that his health gauge lost about one dot, he was surprised again.

For normal fighting games, damage is only dealt with system-set methods. For sure, this «Brain Burst» is not just a normal game. With graphics and sound that is difficult to distinguish from reality, and this detailed realism.

The key to winning fights in this world, must be in there.

While he engraved that in his mind, Haruyuki looked up at his far more experienced enemy.

While he skillfully steadied his bike, Ash Roller stared down at Haruyuki, and began speaking in a metallic high pitched voice.

"Actually, from my win against you this morning, I finally reach 300 points, and became level 2."

The gunmetal helmet's skeleton face-guard was mostly broken, and a part of his face was visible. It did not seem terrifying, what is there looked more like a science type, a slender young man's face.

Duel Avatars are a manifestation of one's inferiority complex, that speech from Kuroyukihime faintly passed by in his mind.

Ash Roller, smiling with thin lips, continued his speech after moving the throttle handle once.

"I was super stumped on what to use the level up bonus on, it had special attack, movement speed up, and wall-climbing. Ah, I made the ultra ~ correct ~ choice ~"

He removed both hands from the handles, and pointed two index fingers at Haruyuki.

"And so you are giga unlucky~"

'I know without you saying so.'

While he grumble in his mind, Haruyuki wasn't just listening quietly. He desperately look around the surroundings, and tried to remember Kuroyukihime's mail, squeezing his knowledge to try to find a way out of this situation.

[If the first attack, or the retreat fails, and you have to fight Ash Roller still on his bike head on, unfortunately the chance of your winning will become very low. Because - ]

Continuing, Kuroyukihime had written about Duel Avatar's «affinity».

For a Burst Linker's automatic English name, it always include a color word.

That color determines the Duel Avatar's affinity.

«Blue» is short range direct attack, «Red» is long range direct attack, and «Yellow» is indirect attack. For middle colors like Purple and Green, can have two types of affinity. Also, for color that is away from the the color circle, the metallic names «Metal Color», instead of attack, these are best at defense affinity.

[Your «Silver» included, the metallic colors are very rare, it is a strong color type. It has resistance against cutting, piercing, heat and poison attacks, and attack strength using it's hard metallic body for close combat are not low. But of course it has weaknesses. Corrosion attacks are it's natural enemy, and it is also weak against blunt attacks.]

That was how Kuroyukihime analyzed Silver Crow's affinity, continuing, she also said the details of the supposedly never before seen Ash Roller.

[On the other hand, Ash Roller's «Ash», in the color circle, it is closer to blue than green. The low color saturation means its attacks are special type. It is hard to tell if the tires are weapons or not, but I am afraid its affinity is the close-range blunt attack type. That means your armor has almost no effect against Ash Roller's charge. In that case, there is only one way against him in a head to head fight.]

- For all the remaining time, continue to dodge.

Even though she said that.

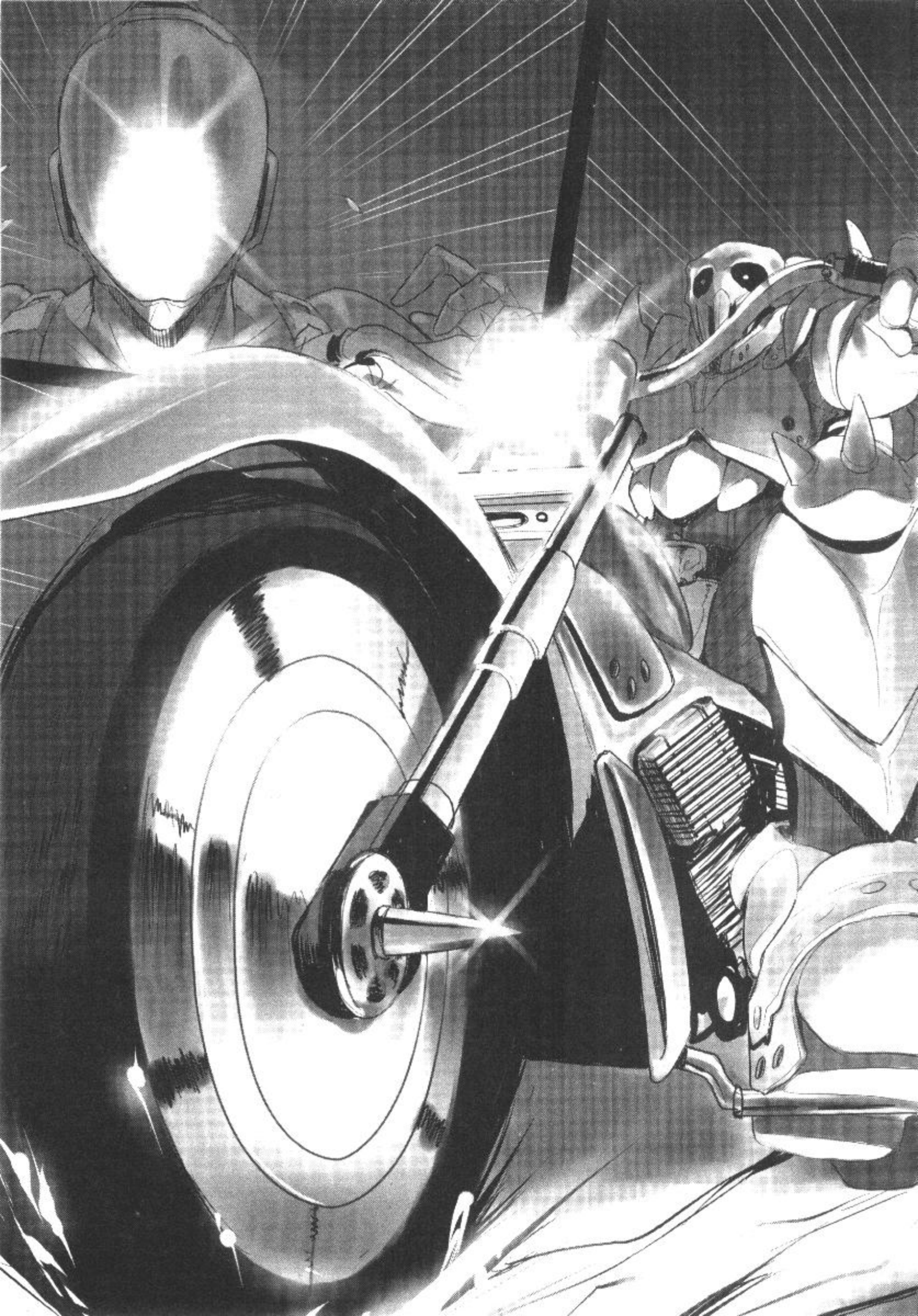
While Haruyuki was in despair, he checked out the size of the building rooftop.

The length and width was under 20 meters. Kuroyukihime's dodge battle plan was probably made for fighting in the empty Seven Road, she probably never thought that the bike could climb walls. The end result was, Haruyuki fled to a place where he was at a disadvantage.

With the bike's charge, it's probably impossible to run and escape to the emergency stairs. How about jumping off the roof knowing that he would take damage? However, if that made him more damaged than Ash Roller is now, there would be no turning back.

To Haruyuki who stood there without a fighting plan, the rider on the metallic horse released a victorious laugh.





"Hyahahaha! No way to fight back huh, you bald shiny boy! Then I will start!!"

Dorooo!! The internal combustion engine roared, and the free wheeling rear tire put out blue smoke.

The front tire hit the ground with a thump, and the huge bike charged straight at Haruyuki.

"Uwaaa!!"

With a scream he jumped right, but the distance was way too short. The tip of his foot was scratched by the tire, and his health gauge decreased. At the same time, with the paralyzing hit, an instant of pain rushed through Haruyuki's nerves.

In virtual games, the «Sensation of Pain» being used was long ago forbidden by law. This really isn't just a game. Even though virtual, at the same time it is a real fight.

After the bike moved just 3 meters past him, it made a huge skid sound then did a spin turn, putting it again in a charge position.

Is there anything? A secret move that will turn the tide in one go, saving him -

That's right, the special attack!

Even though the name is just «Head Butt», maybe it has the power to crush rocks.

Gambling on this one chance, Haruyuki followed the install silhouette's display, and crossed both arms in front. Next, he leaned his upper body forward, and opened his arms.

With a humming sound effect, he noticed that his bald and shiny head was starting to be surrounded by a white aura. The people in the surrounding gallery put out a surprised sound.

...This can work!!

With deep belief, Haruyuki stared at the huge bike in front of him.

"Uoooo!"

With that shout, he aimed his shinning head at the bike's headlights and charged - .

Long before his head hit, he was run over by the front tire and fell backward, making a human-shaped hole in the concrete. The effect light on his head dispersed into space, and his special attack gauge emptied and disappeared.

The gallery's roar of laughter shook the stage. Mixed in that, one person's whisper reached his ears.

"Unfortunately, it looks like the end."

Haruyuki's whole body was covered by a familiar heat of humiliation.

'Damn. Damn. Inside virtual games, I should be the hero. My character is way too weak. What is this special attack Head Butt that won't even hit, I can't take this.'

He stood up, but in a rotten mood sat back down, in Haruyuki's view was - .

Far away, on top of a tall building, a lonely standing silhouette was there.

The rolled hair waving in the night wind. The softly moving dress. See-through looking butterfly wings.

The shape smaller than a rice grain, it's expression can not be seen. However, it's stern look going his way, Haruyuki felt it fully.

Can't - can't give up.

Even if losing, stand up again and again, lose ungracefully. If he can't do at least that, he can't even be a pawn for that person.

Pushing down his humiliation, Haruyuki desperately thought about his various knowledge and experiences.

Virtual but real. That is this game, «Brain Burst» biggest specialty. Overwhelming detail and reality. Then, that Ash Roller's bike too, should not be just polygons made for looks. Delicately recreated means it should have weakness too.

Bike - that is the previous era gasoline engine type's feature, what is it?

Noisy. Stinks of gas. Those are weaknesses before meeting it, so they don't matter to the current situation.

It can't move without gasoline. Then make a hole in the tank - no, this kind of pinpoint attack is impossible.

Is there anything else. Anything - .

With its rear tire making tracks while the bike turned, the single bright yellow eye faced Haruyuki for the 3rd time.

At that instant, Haruyuki swallowed a sharp breath.

There is. That. Internal combustion bike's feature, and its weakness.

"Hya - hahahhaa!! Dance more - !!"

With that shout, the iron horse galloped.

Just once is fine. Move, Silver Crow. Faster than that person.

Biting his teeth, Haruyuki stared at the bike rushing at him.

That's right - even though that person is fast, it's not beyond his vision. Instead of a showy dodge, a bare minimum of movement should avoid it.

"...!!"

Taking his full concentration, just before he was bashed flying, Haruyuki slid only 50cm to the right.

The tip of the handle brushed his body a bit, then Ash Roller passed by his eyes.

At that instant, Haruyuki extended both hands, knowing that he would get damaged, he grabbed the edge of the black fender above the rear tire. With shock that almost ripped his fingers off, sparks flew off from the joints in his hands, and his health gauge lightly dropped.

The bike's speed dropped slightly. Not missing this chance, Haruyuki put his feet on the ground hard, and leaned his body back as far as possible. Crackle, the steel feet broke the concrete, and his gauge continue to drop.

"Hyaahaa - !!"

Ash Roller looked back and released a high pitched laughter.

"Idi - ot!! A gully small fry like you wants to try and stop my monster machine!!"

The rider boots stepped on the foot pedal with a crunch. Black leather gloves opened the throttle.

The engine roared, and the muffler put out flames. Right after, the American bike put out fearsome torque, it sped up again while pulling Haruyuki.

Crackle crackle!! He heard his feet release an incredible friction sound - at the same time.

"Oucccchhhh - !!"

It's like his feet are being scraped away, no, the heat and pain of that hit him, Haruyuki screamed.

"Kihyahyahya! If you don't let go in a hurry, you will get shorter - !!"

Ash Roller's sure win voice was mixed with ear splitting metallic sound. His silver legs became red due to overheat, and his health gauge dropped at a fearful speed.

However, Haruyuki did not let go of his hands. He bit his teeth under the silver mask, frantically endured the heat and pain, and simply continued to drag behind the bike.

If this was the Seven Road under them, then Silver Crow's small body would be like Ash Roller said, it might eventually become a small piece of metal and disappear. But the ruin building roof top has limited space, there should be no way to continue dashing forward.

The low fence slowly approached, the skeletal rider made a strange 'Hyoo-' sound and started to bend his bike for a spin turn. The brake rotors spewed out sparks, and white smoke raised from the huge tire.

"Kuuuu!"

Haruyuki desperately resisted being blown away by the centripetal force.

Soon. In half a second, the first and last chance will come.

The engine rotation dropped, the bike finished its turn, it was going to start its violent dash again -

Just before that. For one instant, Silver Crow's feet was firmly on the ground.



"- Oooooo!!"

Haruyuki shouted.

At the same time, summoning all his strength, he raised the fender in his two hands straight up. Sparks flew from his knee, elbow and shoulder, he lost another 10% of his remaining 20% of health gauge, his two small legs endured the huge weight, standing straight.

0.1 second after, the huge tire fiercely spun. But that movement energy did not change to forward momentum. Just barely, the treads were above the ground.

"O...oo?"

Right in front of Haruyuki's eyes, Ash Roller yelled while still sitting facing forward. He frantically moved his hand two or three times more.

With that the engine roared, and the rear tire spun like crazy. However, the steel bike body did not move at all.

This is the «Weakness» that Haruyuki noticed. Different from the in wheel front and back electric motor bikes, the previous era internal combustion bike's engine links to the rear tire with a chain for movement. It's absolutely impossible to lift the whole bike, but with the steel robot avatar, even with reality details, he can keep it up for one hour.

"Damn... you! Hey!! Let me down, baldy!!"

Ash Roller looked back at Haruyuki while shouting. Seeing that, he grinned even though his opponent could not see it.

"No way, if you don't like it, try turning the front wheel."

After returning from the accelerated world, Haruyuki took a huge breath of the afternoon sunlight, and blew out a long breath.

The fight concluded at the count of 600, that is about one second of real time. However his palms were soaked with sweat, and a paralyzing cold.

His tense finger reached for the Neuro Linker's Global Net disconnect button, suddenly his back was hit with a Bam!

"Oh, you did it, Silver Crow! I truly thought you would lose like that."

Turning around, he saw Kuroyukihime's small face with a rare real smile. Both of them accelerated after leaving the school ground, this is of course why she is here, but inside the stage with her viewing the battle from the top of a far building, gave him some confusion.

'That, is the real distance between her and me. Don't be mistaken.'

Listening to his own words, Haruyuki returned an awkward smile.

"I... I too thought I was going to lose."

"Don't be so humble, that was a superb victory. I too, never thought about Ash Roller's bike's internal makeup... It's a weakness that your

avatar's instantaneous strength can handle. Anyway, you took back your points."

"No, more than that. It was 20 points added, that person became level 2."

Kuroyukihime blinked, then gave a huge smile, and hit Haruyuki's shoulder again.

"Hahaha, I see, that was the reason he can climb walls."

"It's no laughing matter, I was shocked."

"Fufufu, ah sorry. Due to that, it was an interesting way to win, right? I heard from the gallery, you are the first one to fight Ash Roller that way. A splendid victory."

"Ah, ha..."

With the movement wheel lifted up and unable to go anywhere, Ash Roller stubbornly continued to rev the bike for 5 minutes before he got off it.

For Haruyuki who was just running away or getting blown away, he was just waiting for a fistfight, of course he won easily with steel fists.

"Even your «Punch» and «Kick» became useful. As for «Head Butt», that might be fine with orthodox fighting type opponent. ...Ah, we can't just stand here and talk."

Hearing Kuroyukihime's words, Haruyuki looked around. With them standing right in front of the school gate, the students leaving school

while they walked, or just stood there staring at them with obvious curiosity.

Haruyuki shrunk himself to make him look smaller, and his breath stopped when he saw Chiyuri's face in the crowd. He turned his face away in reaction.

Yesterday, him running away to escape in front of Chiyuri and Takumu was still fresh in his memory. He had not apologized for the sandwich incident either, then he did that, now he does not know how or where to start repairing their relationship.

'No - it's not my fault. I had told her many times to keep quiet, it was her fault for telling Takumu about Araya's group. I don't want to be shown mercy and pity.'

To Haruyuki who was hunching down like a rock, Kuroyukihime sort of asked him.

"What happened, if we are changing locations, how about that shop there... Hmm? You are..."

"What are you trying to do with Haru?"

Chiyuri's sudden close range voice made Haruyuki jump.

Looking up, he saw his childhood friend's slender body stiffen up fully to go against Kuroyukihime.

Only Haruyuki understood, that was Chiyuri's biggest not-wanting-to-lose pose, she stiffened her big eyebrows, and again spoke in a low tone.

"The violence on Haru yesterday was due to some trick by senpai right? Then you expose Haru like this again, what are you trying to do? Are you getting enjoyment from this?"

Hiii - .

What is this what is this situation what should I do.

Completely over his capacity, while his body is fully shrunk down, he somehow managed to move his tense mouth.

"H, hey, Chiyu..."

"Haru, you shut up!!"

Having been hit with the stare that was carved in him while he was still a kid, all he could do was stand still and be quiet.

While being hit with that super powered Chiyuri Beam, Kuroyukihime showed her dignity, with a cool smile and small tilt of her head, said.

"Hmm... I don't really understand what you mean. Are you accusing me of enjoying myself by staining Arita-kun's will somehow?"

"Isn't that right? Haru hates this kind of thing, standing out and being stared at. Hasn't he been really troubled since earlier? Although senpai would not understand."

"Ah. It is true that I might have put Arita-kun in a situation that he is uncomfortable with. However, I think it is his choice to accept it or not. Do you have any right to say it?"

"I have. In this school, I've been friends with Haru for the longest time."

"Oh, friend... huh."

Upon hearing Chiyuri's announcement, on the white beautiful face, a super cold Kuroyukihime smile appeared.

"Then, I have higher priority. You have heard the rumors right, I confessed to him and am currently waiting for a reply. We are going on a small date."

Gyaaa - .

Oh no this is it the world is ending I have to transfer schools tomorrow.

It was like when he was accelerating, Chiyuri and the surrounding people froze instantly. Haruyuki too froze in an unnatural pose, only sweat continued to pour from his face.

In the silence, Kuroyukihime took out a pure white handkerchief from her uniform's pocket.

"It's almost winter, what a strange person."

While wiping off Haruyuki's sweat, she took his right arm in her own.

"See you later then, friend-kun."





Then, going in the center of the walkway lined by students on the left and right, Kuroyukihime pulled Haruyuki's huge body along as she moved forward.

While being pulled forward, he looked back and saw his childhood friend's face, changing from dumbfounded to shock then to something just short of an angry explosion.

"G, going back to before... What were you thinking!!"

After entering the brick paved ally from the main road, Haruyuki finally pulled his arm from Kuroyukihime and shouted.

"I, I have to say it, in this world there are things that can not be solved with «Acceleration»!!"

"Ahahahaha."

Kuroyukihime laughed from the bottom of her heart.

"Hahaha... You reach this main point about Burst Linkers so quickly, that is great."

"That is not great at all! It is senpai's fault if I can't go to school tomorrow!"

"Hey, your face did not look altogether bad this time either. I took a field of view screen shot this time too, want to see?"

"I don't want to see it! Rather, throw it away!!"

"Fufufu..."

With clop clop sounds as her loafers bit into the pavement, Kuroyukihime's shoulders shook as she continued to laugh for a while. Eventually, letting out a small breath, she continued with an 'oh, about that'.

"There is something I wonder about... that is, I want to make sure."

"Oh? Wonder about... you mean Chiyuri?"

"Ah, close enough to use just first name?"

"Ah, no, well, she is Kurashima, Kurashima Chiyuri from first year class one."

"I know. It's just that it's the first time I heard of her being your best friend. On the other hand, is she really just a friend?"

While being showered with looks of doubt, Haruyuki nodded a few times.

"That's right. Old childhood ties...since she has a boyfriend."

"Oh? That means... no... Hmm, hum."

"...What's that hum about?"

"No, nothing, I just again realized the depth of the real world."

"Ah, ha..."

Sighing while not knowing what's going on, Haruyuki asked about something that tickled him earlier.

"Ah... earlier, you said you know Chiyuri's name?"

"That's right. It was purely incidental, I noticed her with a meaning different from noticing you."

"What does that mean?"

"It can not be easily explained. It is connected to the reason I found and invited you to the accelerated world. Well, let's drink some tea while we slowly talk. As a victory celebration, my treat."

Saying so, Kuroyukihime changed direction, heading to the coffee shop chain store that seemed to be her original destination.

Maybe it was still early in the afternoon, there were not too many people in the store, but as Kuroyukihime stepped in, Haruyuki felt some gazes concentrating on them. Just that, it's scary to follow behind her.

Just going home from school - no, doesn't matter what time in his life, Haruyuki who had no experience drinking tea with a girl, his brain was in overload mode, so he automatically ordered a huge sweet drink and let Kuroyukihime pay for him, then sunk into the seat of a table far inside the store. Right after, he took the cable offered and plugged it into his Neuro Linker, while thinking.

'Uwaa what is this, this is like a real date...'

'It does not look like that, this kind of combination. Sister and brother? No, master and bag holder?'

"I can understand what you are thinking."

At that moment, noticing that he is being stared at, he took a quick sip of his caramel favored sweet drink.

"N, no, nothing. Instead of that, earlier you mentioned the reason for inviting me to the accelerated world..."

"Don't be in such a hurry. It's a long... talk."

With high class elegance, she sipped her not-too-sweet looking drink, then with a sigh rested her chin on her hands.

With the pale yellow light coming from the window, that shape looked like a uniformed middle school student in an old foreign country movie scene, Haruyuki involuntarily became speechless. It was like there was an old style shooting screen in front of him, with just a direct cable linking them - .

Since he was just looking with a blank gaze, the sudden tap on his right hand on the table almost made him jump.

"Well, you did really well earlier. Again, congratulations on your victory, Haruyuki-kun."

"Ah... yes, thank you very much. It was because of senpai's advice."

"No, it's because of your ability to adapt. At that rate, you will soon be level 2. Or you might become level 3 within this year."

"Ha... ah... Actually, I can't even imagine it..."

Having barely won in a dangerous situation. Later, winning tens more of such hard fights, the thought just amazes him.

Then, Kuroyukihime's smile disappeared, and like she was reading what's in Haruyuki's heart, she nodded.

"Hum. Actually, it's a long road like you thought. Of the around 1000 Burst Linkers, only a limited number reach level 4. Level 5 and 6 is almost impossible to reach with solo play. Level 7 and 8 Burst Linkers are all huge groups' commander class, without a doubt."

"Gr, groups?"

"It is like guilds and teams in other online games. For us, «Army Corps»... called «Legions». In the current accelerated world, control is divided between six huge Legions. Controlling those are the rare six level 9 Burst Linkers... Crowned with the names of Blue, Red, Yellow, Green, Purple and White, the «Six Kings of Pure Color»!"

Suddenly, a knife sharp sound echoed in his mind, Haruyuki opened his eyes wide. Noticing the stare, Kuroyukihime blinked some then with a slight bitter smile.

"...Sorry for the loud voice."

"No... but, six people?"

It was a shock to learn that there were around 1000 Burst Linkers, but there was only awe to learn that there was so few level 9s.

"I have played many net games, but I have never heard of so few players reaching the level cap."

Maybe with sure feeling, Haruyuki said so with a feeling of envy, Kuroyukihime who heard that, one of her eyebrows moved, and she tilted her head.

"I never said that level 9 was the cap."

"Eh... then there is a level 10? How many...?"

The answer, was again denied with a juice sip. Kuroyukihime took another sip of her coffee, then leaned her back into the seat and stared playfully in space. The cable that was pulled, swings between them in a silver dance.

"Brain Burst... actual name «Brain Burst 2039» was released by an unknown programmer seven years ago, it has been updated many times since then. However after all that time, there isn't a single Burst Linker who has reached level 10. There is only one reason... the set rule was just too cruel."

"Do you have to win a lot of duels? Like a 1000 wins... or 10000?"

"No, just 5 times is enough."

After the unexpected words left her lips, for an instant, she had an insecure smile.

"Just that the opponent can only be another level 9 Linker. Furthermore, with even one loss from a level 9 fight, at that moment all the points will be lost, and Brain Burst will forcefully uninstall..."

The speechless Haruyuki was stared straight by the dark eyes of Kuroyukihime.

"Haruyuki-kun. An amazing phenomenon like «Thought Acceleration»'s Brain Burst being kept secret from the general public for seven years, don't you think it's strange?"

That sudden question confused Haruyuki, but saying so, it is a mystery. If there were 1000 Burst Linkers, the secret would have been leaked long ago, and the world should be amazed by it.

"The reason for that, is the strict requirement for a Brain Burst candidate."

"Requirement...? Good at games... or something...?"

To Haruyuki's question, Kuroyukihime answered with a bitter smile.

"It's not that vague a reason. The biggest requirement is, «After birth, usually continue to wear the Neuro Linker». The first generation Neuro Linker was sold on the market 15 years ago... that means."

Pausing for an instant, Kuroyukihime slowly continue.

"There are no adult Burst Linkers. The oldest is 15 years old, just a child. For a child's play, he will do anything to defend his usage while he was a



Burst Linker, and after forceful uninstall, whatever he says won't be believed by the adults."

The glossy lips, for one instant, showed a sarcastic smile.

"That is also like a shared child's sweet illusion. The summer two years ago... the young kings reached level 9 at almost the same time. Right after, the system message showed the cruel rule to reach level 10. The result, did they go into a bloody war? - No. The kings chose eternal stagnation. Instead of going forward, they chose to maintain their mini gardens. That means... the accelerated world was divided between the Legions for control, and a no-invasion treaty was signed. What a farce. To reach level 9, they have hunted numerous Linkers."

Haruyuki swallowed his saliva in a gulp. Pain ran through his dry throat, he took a big sip of his melted caramel frappé then sent out his thoughts fearfully.

"That is, senpai's goal is to challenge this «Six Kings of Pure Color»...?"

Hearing that, Kuroyukihime displayed a mysterious smile.

"No, I already did that."

"Wha...!?"

"The Six Kings... were once the «Seven Kings of Pure Color». Even though they were rivals, they were linked by strong bonds, these seven boys and girls. They went through numerous duels, winning and losing, however

they did not hold a single drop of hate. The «Black King» betrayed everyone, and hunted them, a night two years ago.”

Black - King.

That is, the avatar name should be... black crowned...

Haruyuki opened his eyes wide, and stared with breaths held, as Kuroyukihime slowly nodded.

“Yes... that is me. The Black King, Black Lotus, was the only person of the people who reached level 9 that did not choose peace. Throwing away bonds, friendship, respect, and everything to suggest a fight with all seven’s total points on the table. When that was rejected - the meeting round table was suddenly covered with fresh blood.”

“Wh... what did... you do?”

“At the last night of the Seven Kings’ meeting... even saying so, it was not a meeting in the real world. Because Burst Linkers do their best to hide their real face and name.”

Why is that, Haruyuki was going to ask, but he soon realized the reason. If real face and name was exposed to other Burst Linkers, the worst situation, «Attacked in reality» might happen. When someone is in a situation where he can not get points any other way, he might just do that.

Kuroyukihime made a small nod like she read Haruyuki’s mind, and continued.

"For that night's meeting, the seven duelists were all connected to the same field with «Battle Royal Mode». I... when the «Red King» was unguarded while he was preaching friendship and non-aggression..."

Behind the silky front hair, the white face lost all expression. Her empty eyes staring at one point, Kuroyukihime lonely spoke what was ahead.

"Cut off his head. A perfect critical hit... he lost his full gauge in an instant, lost all his points according to the new rule, that is, losing his Brain Burst. The current Red King is the second generation. What was next... was like the realization of hell, Fufu. Red's lover, Purple cried while screaming, Blue went crazy with anger, those people and I went into a killing play with no respect or honor. I knew it was the first and last chance... desperately trying to somehow take four more heads, it was truly reckless..."

Her lips with almost no color became distorted, a voiced laughter leaked out.

"Rational judgement was blown out. I fought while driven by madness, however I did not hunt a single person more, neither was I taken down, when I noticed it, 30 minute had passed and I was linked out. - For the next two years, all I did was run and hide. The current me, is accelerated world's biggest traitor, the head with the highest reward, and the lowest coward."

"...Why..."

The monologue was so gruesome that Haruyuki's thoughts were half paralyzed, only a simple question was released from his mind.

"Why did you do that...?"

"Instead of friendship or honor, I picked something far beyond... becoming level 10. You can say that is my only reason for living. - The System Message also said this. The Burst Linker who reach level 10 will have a chance to meet the program creator, find out the real reason for Brain Burst's existence, and be told about its ultimate goal. I... want to know. I want to know no matter what."

Putting both elbows on the table, Kuroyukihime whose face was hidden by her linked hands, her tortured thought that seemed to echo from a bottomless abyss reached Haruyuki.

"Accelerating thoughts to obtain money, performance, and fame. Are those the only reason we fight, the rewards we wish for, and the limits that we can reach? More... isn't there something more ahead...? This... shell called human... on the outside... more..."

Ah - .

A little, just a little... he understood. From the intolerable «Ground», looking up at the far away «Sky», that kind of feeling.

Maybe his momentary thought reached her, Kuroyukihime slowly raised her face, she looked at Haruyuki with eyes radiating pressure.

But that was only for an instant, the beautiful upperclassman let her arms fall to the table, and spoke with a dry smile.

"...So, are you dumbfounded... or maybe scornful, Haruyuki-kun? I, for my goal, someday I might sacrifice you too. If you say you cannot cooperate anymore, then that's fine. I won't hold you back, and I won't take back your Brain Burst."

After Haruyuki thought for about two seconds - .

He slowly extended his right hand, and stopped about one centimeter before Kuroyukihime's fingers, saying.

"Ah, that is... For any game, giving up seeing the ending, staying in the map right in front of it forever, if there is a person like that, then he is a fool. It is of course a matter of aiming for a higher level... since, isn't this the reason for the existence of Brain Burst?"

It was not a lie to win favor from Kuroyukihime. For a hard core gamer, Haruyuki truly thought so from the bottom of his heart.

Kuroyukihime's eyes instantly opened wide, a few seconds later, she blew out a laugh.

"Fu,ahaha... How could it be, you are more of a Burst Linker than me. I see... it's of course a matter to aim for, that way huh..."

"It... it's no laughing matter."

A little hurt, Haruyuki's mouth became pointed, he straightened his back and continued.

"Any... anyway, I will continue to help senpai. I too, want to eventually become... level 10."

Suddenly, Kuroyukihime's left hand that was on the table moved, and grabbed hold of Haruyuki's right hand.

"Thank you."

To the flustered Haruyuki, Kuroyukihime's thoughts that were hollow and without reverberation just before, warmly flowed into him.

"Thank you, Haruyuki-kun. For sure... my judgement was not wrong. I am glad to have chosen you, from the bottom of my heart."

At this point, he should return the hand held, and look into each other's eyes - these kind of thing, is something that Haruyuki could not possibly do.

Instead of that, he pulled his right hand back on reaction, shrunk his head like a turtle, and stuttered with his retreated thought voice.

"N, no, not really... I am just someone barely to be used... In- instead of that, what is the main point, that is... what am I supposed to do...?"

In the short silence, in the eyes that stared straight at him, was it compassion?

Eventually, after a short sigh, Kuroyukihime spoke into the silence.

"That's right. That was left for a long while... let's get to the main point. Earlier, I told you about how I lived for two years, right?"

Haruyuki too, took a huge sigh and raised his head, he nodded to Kuroyukihime whose cool expression had returned.

"That is, it was not that I was able to continually win against the anger crazed kings or the assassins they sent. It's not that... during these two years, I have not even once connected my Neuro Linker to the Global Net. If I am not on the matching list, then there won't be any challenge or anything right?"

"Aa... Rea... really?"

He said without thinking. For Haruyuki, getting information from the Global Net is a must, like drinking water or breathing air. If that was cut, it would really be like the comparison of withering to death.

"Really really. I can use set terminal panels to check sites or read email, although the 2D view makes my eyes tired. It's nothing once you get used to it... however, even if I am disconnected from the Global Net, for my social status, there is one net that I must connect to everyday."

"S, status...? Is that rich girl... no, princess?"

"Idiot."

The cold voice denied it, he finally thought that this person too is a middle school student like him.



"Ah, ah... I see. It is the Umesato school's local net. ...Ah... wa, wait a minute. No way..."

"It's true."

Kuroyukihime finished her coffee in one gulp, then continued while holding her cup.

"Two months ago, the day after summer vacation ended, I was «Challenged» through the school local net. By someone in Umesato middle school."

To the speechless Haruyuki, he was further surprised by the continuing speech.

"And the worst thing was... At that point my original Avatar was switched to a viewing dummy Avatar."

"Dummy... is that kind of function available?"

"Yes. There are many who want to be in the gallery while hiding their real avatar. But of course, as a dummy it does not have any fighting ability. However the problem was not that... thinking back on it now it was most regrettable, I, for the dummy avatar, used my avatar for the school local net. I had never expected that a Burst Linker would suddenly appear in the same school..."

After a moment of doubt, Haruyuki did a slight jump that made his chair creak.

"Eh... is that the black swallowtail butterfly...!?"

The sexy avatar shown in his mind, overlapped the neatly uniformed shape in front of him.

"The enemy saw that... in the school local net...? That means... that is..."

"You are pretty sharp. Yes, that person, this me..."

"That person knew that this real me is «Black Lotus». The Burst Linker's biggest taboo, «Reality Fracture». I became fearful of attacks in the real world by the six kings' assassins."

Attack... in the real world.

Haruyuki had already deduced the fearful meaning of those words. If the real person can be stopped, to put it in extremes, then kidnapping and imprisonment while using violence and threat to steal points is possible too.

Of course that is a felony. Even for «Normal Games», there were incidents of reality harm from troubles between players. And then, «Brain Burst» is not just a normal game.

Haruyuki held his breath while waiting for Kuroyukihime to continue explaining. However - .

"Even so... nothing happened. No attacks, nor even sign of contact."

"What...?"

"I too was in a huge confusion, but... if it was like that, it can only be thought of like this. The enemy... wants to keep me to themselves. Fortunate to have found out the real me, gradually chase after me who has a huge reward on her head, without letting the legion that person belongs to know, hunt all my points for their self."

"Chase after...?"

Looking at the head tilted Haruyuki, Kuroyukihime coughed, then desperately listed.

"In the toilet. While changing. During shower. During school, moments when I am not mentally prepared are plenty. Being pin pointed and challenged during those moments, there is no way to fully fight back."

"Sho...wer, ooh."

To Haruyuki who unconsciously imagined the full shower scene and leaked that word, Kuroyukihime again gave him another cold stare. Fortunately, she did not go after him beyond that, she sighed and continued.

"Actually, I was attacked over ten times this past two months by that person. Recently it was not all blunt timing, so I was somehow able to escape with a draw."

"I... see. How to say it, that is a very greedy person... But, in a certain sense, it's a blessing within misfortune, kind of..."



"Well, compared to attacks in reality, yes. But, other than that, I also can not return to my original Duel Avatar and beat him up. If the enemy thought it was no longer possible, he might give up my points, and give my head to the kings for the reward points instead..."

"A, ah... I see... yea."

Haruyuki unconsciously muttered. The reason she was stuck was because of this.

"Then, but, what should we do? You can't run, and can not attack back."

"I know. There is only one way out. We have to know his real side too. His school year and class, and if he is a Burst Linker I don't know about."

Bam. The feeling of wanting to hit his knee overwhelmed Haruyuki. In a situation when both sides know each other's real identity, to protect their Brain Burst, they should absolutely be able to stop the fighting.

"I see, that is right. If we can do that, we can completely seal the enemy's movement. Saying so... isn't that really simple? For example during morning assembly, when all the students gather in the auditorium, accelerate and challenge him. From the place he appear, you can find his class and seat number."

"Oh, pretty good. It took me a day to think of doing it that way."

"...That means... you have already tried it?"

"Already tried. And then... I was shocked. It had been a while since I was so surprised."

"Wh... who was it...?"

"There was no one."

Kuroyukihime's answer was not within Haruyuki's expectation.

"There was only my name on the matching list. As you know, for Umesato middle school students, when they are in school, they are not allow to disconnect from the local net even for one instant. Since attendance and classes are done through the net. If you disconnect, you will instantly be warned through the school announcement system. For that reason, I also can not block the enemy's attacks. Even so... that person was not on the list!"

"He might be taking a break from school due to flu?"

Kuroyukihime stared at Haruyuki, then lightly snorted.

"I already checked that all the absent students were there that day. Other than that, after I was attacked, and managed to painfully escape with a draw, and right after, his name was not on the list either. That means... it's hard to believe, that person can block his name, using some kind of method. He can challenge anyone as he likes, but other Burst Linkers cannot touch him. This blows away accelerated world's golden rules at its roots, a terrible privilege. To be able to do that... means that there is a

super hacker that succeeded in modifying the impregnable Brain Burst Program, or - someone that has contact with the program creator...”

Meeting the creator, finding out the «Meaning» of Brain Burst was her only goal for living. Kuroyukihime said that a little while ago. Then, finding out the truth of this mysterious enemy might be more important than her own protection.

For Haruyuki who deduced that, there was an unknown tingling feel in his chest, he muttered.

“...That means... the thing senpai want me to do... is help to find the truth about this enemy right?”

‘Not a knight protecting a princess from a demon.’

‘No... that is a matter of course. Don’t think about stupid things. I am a hound chasing a beast, or just a pig sniffing for mushroom in the ground.’

“Yea... well, that’s about it.”

Not showing any sign of noticing Haruyuki’s moment of conflict, Kuroyukihime lightly nodded.

“Actually, I have already acquired a lot of information. I will list the ones I understand now... First, the enemy’s name. His Duel Avatar is called «Cyan Pile». Level 4.”

“Cyan... Pile...”



Very... cool. That seems to be strong. No, Kuroyukihime said level 4 was the first wall. So that means actually strong.

"Affinity is, very pure «Close Range Blue». I have seen him punch out the stage's thin wall many times. Does not have any lateral jump equipment. That's why I was able to escape thus far... to be honest, I'm almost at my limit. I can not keep up the concentration."

That must be it. From arriving at school till leaving for home, not knowing at what moment the attack come, this kind of situation, Haruyuki probably could not endure for three days. However, Kuroyukihime, without showing any sign of exhaustion, continued to send him clear thoughts.

"Also, this is just a conjecture... that not just me, that person is being haunted too, I get this feeling."

"Eh... by what?"

"Fear of losing acceleration. That person is probably on the dangerous verge of drying up his Burst Points. For people with enough points, normal duels are more enjoyable. Like Ash Roller that you fought."

"A, ah... that's right, that person was enjoying it a lot..."

"However, Cyan Pile does not have a single bit of that extra. Silent, without any inhibition, and chased me with an almost crazy appearance. That is a sign only Burst Linkers fearing loss have. The cheap reward from

the kings on my head was not enough, he wants all the points that I have gained. ...Well, that does not mean much of anything..."

"I... see. We can not really do a mental check on all the students. Are those the only things you found out?"

Haruyuki lightly asked to find out - but.

Suddenly, he somehow felt that Kuroyukihime's thought became strangely tense. He thought a bit, before he could ask, she shook her head and said.

"No. There is one more important information detail. ...The Guide Cursor."

"Oh? That water colored arrow icon?"

"Yes. That, from the start of battle, points to the enemy's position. That means... even if I can not see the moment that Cyan Pile appear, if I memorize the starting direction of the cursor, the enemy's real body will be somewhere in a direct line in that direction... this is the theory."

"Ah... ah! I see, that's right. If the stage is same shape as the real one, then you can find out which corner of the school he is hiding at!"

"That's right. I have memorized the guide cursor direction from tens of attacks up to now, and compared it to the list of students in Umesato middle school in that direction, keeping track of the overlap names. The result, I deduced the person with the highest chance of being Cyan Pile. But, there is no actual evidence. In a place that is packed with so many people, one line is not enough. Since there are usually tens of students in

that line. ...Haruyuki-kun, what I want you to do is, when I am attacked next time, you will be automatic audience, then memorize Cyan Pile's direction with the gallery use cursor."

"Cursor... if there are two, then..."

At Haruyuki's amazed speech, Kuroyukihime nodded with a harder than usual expression.

"Right. With two cursors, then there is only one point they cross. Then, if there is a student at that position... that will be proof without doubt. Being Cyan Pile's real body."

Biting her lips, Kuroyukihime's right hand finger swiftly moving in space, manipulating the virtual desktop that only she can see. The one file that she pulled out, was going to slide toward Haruyuki - right before, however, her finger stopped.

"...? What's going on? Who is that, this candidate?"

With his interest roused, even after he drank the huge frappé, his throat was still dry when he moved it, he leaned far out.

Kuroyukihime still seemed to be hesitating, eventually, like she has something else to say, finally shot the file over.

"Listen... when I prepared that file, it was one week before meeting you at that game corner, after a difficult search to find the third acceleration candidate in Umesato middle school."

Not understanding why she has to say that, Haruyuki wrinkled his brow as he accepted the file. He unhesitatingly tapped on the icon in his virtual desktop.

What opened, was just one picture. It was probably used in student identification cards, a bust up frontal shot was shown.

"...Eh...? This...? Wh...y."

Vigorously cut neat short hair. Blue hairpin. Cat like large eyes.

Looks familiar... not just that. It's a face he has seen the longest in the world other than his mother.

"Chi... Chiyuri? That person is... a Burst Linker...?"

Muttering, he relaxed for more than five seconds, then burst the bubble and faced Kuroyukihime.

"No... that is not possible! She is very bad at games. She is bad at every genre... there is no way she has the aptitude for Burst Linker. Slow-witted... everything shows up on her face... that is, she is not someone that can stubbornly hunt senpai."

"You seem to know a lot about her."

Hearing the slightly harder voice, Haruyuki said without looking at Kuroyukihime's eyes.

"That is... well, we are childhood friends..."

"When I met her earlier at the school gate, I was surprised. If she is «Cyan Pile» then of course she would know that I am «Black Lotus». I suspected she had some kind of plan, but..."

"That is, because she is not deft enough for this kind of psychological like attack. Actually she is extremely inept, all her thoughts are shown on her face."

Somehow, the more Haruyuki protested, the higher the angle Kuroyukihime's eyebrows became, she replied with a cold voice.

"In that case it is more natural to think that she is «Cyan Pile» right? She... Kurashima-kun clearly showed hostility toward me, you saw it too."

"No, that is, not like that, it was because senpai and I Direct Connected and things..."

"Why would she be angry about that? Kurashima-kun has a genuine boyfriend right? Then, if Haruyuki-kun and I direct connect or link arms, she has no obligation to complain."

"...That is... it is like that but..."

How did it become like this, Haruyuki felt like holding his head as he became speechless. Chiyuri surely has a nothing to complaint about boyfriend in Takumu, other than that, that is - I am her - .

Underling? Belonging? Possessed property?

Some unspeakable words crossed his mind, he was having trouble with how to explain the nuance, when Kuroyukihime showered him without mercy.

"Maybe her attitude is like this? Kurashima-kun was a Burst Linker from before, thinking of eventually making you into her «Child». Then I suddenly snatch you from the side. So, unable to hold her anger, she came after me. How about that?"

Logical or illogical theory somehow became a speech of a somewhat spoiled brat; unable to understand Kuroyukihime's mentality at all, when he noticed, he had already went with the flow and announced.

"I... understand! Then, I will directly check with her!"

"Oh?"

Moving one eyebrow, Kuroyukihime obstinately said.

"But, how are you planning to do it? Asking her face to face if she is a Burst Linker won't work; you understand why, right? Saying so, when «Cyan Pile» can freely block attacks, you cannot just challenge her when you see her. The reason I am so troubled in the first place is because I cannot find out. Just saying any fancy idea can be troublesome."

"It's not just a fancy idea!"

Unable to hold back a sharp retort, Haruyuki did so with pointed mouth.

“Listen, I will direct connect with her. Even with attack blocking, during direct connect I should be able to check her memory to see if she has the Brain Burst program or not. Senpai should be satisfied with this right?”



## Chapter 5

‘—Why? Why?’

While hunching his shoulders dejectedly and trudgingly walking home on the evening sidewalk, Haruyuki kept repeating those two words in his mind.

‘Why did things turn out this way?’

‘Even though I only desired to be Kuroyukihime-senpai’s faithful pawn, why did I reply in such a quarrelsome manner in the end and rush out of the store to return home?’

‘Please, let me go back just 30 minutes in time!!’ Haruyuki keenly prayed for that, but it was impossible, even with Brain Burst that could nearly stop actual time.

But then, even if he could reload that scene like an adventure game, he felt that it would still be difficult to obediently agree to the theory that Chiyuri = <<Cyan Pile>>. Haruyuki just couldn’t believe that Chiyuri being a Burst Linker and moreover that she had hid it from him for such a long time was possible.

No—It wasn’t that he didn’t believe it, but that he didn’t want to believe it.

Honestly speaking, there was no objective proof that substantiated this. Though it had been different when they were young, he hadn’t had a

long talk with Chiyuri for the past one or two years here. Even though not as much as Kuroyukihime, Chiyuri, as a girl, was also a plenty mysterious existence to Haruyuki.

Also, it could be said that there was proof that disproved that she was unable to keep something secret. Because, even though Haruyuki had begged her so much, Chiyuri had consulted about the matter of his being bullied with Takumu and hid that from him.

Come to think of it, before he could make such a dangerous request like Direct Connecting with her, he had to at least apologize for the matter of knocking down the sandwiches. And in order to apologize, he would first have to accept and swallow the fact that Chiyuri and Takumi had discussed this and that about him.

That could easily take one week. Rather, he didn't want to think about it. He would rather not confirm it and leave the matter alone. But then, he would have no choice but to accept the Chiyuri = <<Cyan Pile>> theory.

'What in the world do I want to do? What do I want to do with Taku, Chiyuri, and Kuroyukihime?'

While overloaded with thoughts that practically emitted burnt fumes from his head, Haruyuki passed through the entrance of his apartment building with heavy steps.

He briefly glanced at the time display in the corner of his vision. It was 5:30 PM.

Chiyuri would already be home, but Takumu should be still at school practicing in his Kendo Club. So, the two of couldn't be having a private chat together at one of their homes.

Inside the elevator lift, Haruyuki agonized within himself plenty until the warning alarm rang.

Then, he pressed the button for the 23rd floor where he lived.

After the lift had risen halfway, he pressed the button two floors below that.

"Oh my, Haru-chan, it's been so long since I last saw you!!"

As Chiyuri's mother cried out that out with a smiling face as soon as the door opened, but Haruyuki mumbled a 'long time no see' in response.

"Ah, you've grown taller, how old are you now, wait, that's right, you're the same as age as Chiyu who is 13 years old, after all. Since you haven't come over to play ever since entering middle school, oba-san\* was so lonely, you can take it easy and stay here as long as you like today, okay? Please have supper here, since my daughter has been eating so little lately, all the food I've made has been in vain. That's right, I thought of making Haru-chan's favorite dish of curry today, I will be cooking a lot of helpings tonight so just help yourself, Chiyuri will also be happy, since she's been displeased about not playing with Haru-chan recently."

The seemingly endless chattering of Chiyuri's mother was cut off by a sharp voice that sounded from inside the hallway.

"Mama!!"

Looking past Chiyuri's mother, Haruyuki saw Chiyuri staring at them with an expression of raging fire as she stuck her head out from the living room.

"Please don't talk about unnecessary stuff!!"

"Yes, yes, she's at that rebellious age. Haru-chan, please relax and stay as long as you like."

Seeing off Chiyuri's mama as she retired to the kitchen from a door in the middle of the hallway while waving her hand with a pleasant smile, Haruyuki once again put a stiff smile on his face.

"...H-Hey."

"....."

Giving a long stare, Chiyuri moved her small chin in a manner that signaled "Are you coming in?", and then disappeared back into the living room. Letting out a strained breath and taking off his shoes, Haruyuki mumbled quietly.

"Sorry to intrude..."

In the past—until the time of his third or fourth year of elementary school, he would have said "I'm back" instead. Back then he would play outside

with Chiyuri and Takumu until it was dark, and he would always return to the Kurashima household first after becoming sweaty. He would take a bath, be treated to dinner and even watch the television before wearily returning to his empty home two floors above. To Haruyuki, who had been bullied at school even in those days, those evenings were the only times that seemed fun.

But that also ended two years ago.

That time, when Takumu confessed to Chiyuri, and she then consulted with Haruyuki about it.

Among the slippers on the rack next to the door frame, the ones with blue bear faces that Haruyuki had always used were still there. He put his feet into the faded slippers and timidly opened the door to the living room, but Chiyuri was nowhere to be seen within.

After running his sweaty palms on the trousers of his uniform, he passed through the house that he knew by the back of his hand and softly knocked on the door to Chiyuri's room, which had been inside the most.

".....Come in."

After a brief moment of silence, he heard the short reply. After taking a big gulp, Haruyuki turned the doorknob.

Since he had last visited it two years ago, Chiyuri's room hadn't changed much from his memories, having the same simple interior decoration as

back then. Her desk and bed had a colour tone of black and white and her curtains were also a monochrome, very similar to Haruyuki's room.

But, there were also several changes. First, it had a somewhat excessively good smell. Second, there was also the clothes of Chiyuri, who was sitting on her bed with a sullen face.

Of course she wasn't still in her uniform. However, Chiyuri, who had had only a tomboyish appearance during elementary school, was now dressed in a pink fluttering skirt with some kind of white fluffy sweater.

Well, after all...she did go on dates with Takumu... As Haruyuki thought that while stunned, he was hit by an unexpected first strike.

"I called you so many times yesterday."

"Heh...?"

Staring at her from below, Haruyuki let out a stupid response.

'Yesterday—oh, right, that day had ended with me running away in front of Chiyuri and Takumu. Uhii, before that, I have to apologize for the earlier sandwich incident first.'

"Y-Yeah, that...it's because I disconnected my Neuro Linker during all of yesterday..."

"Letting me send you a message should be fine. Because of that, I didn't go to sleep until really late last night!"

"So...Sorry..."

As Haruyuki apologized to Chiyuri who was puffing out her cheeks, he murmured in his mind 'Just as I thought, she couldn't be'.

No matter how he thought about it, she just couldn't be that. To think she could be the Burst Linker «Cyan Pile», and moreover a strong warrior of Level 4. And on top of that, a super-hacker that successfully could change the Brain Burst program that no one else could as well!

But, even if he said that, getting proof of that wasn't easy. Like he declared to Kuroyukihime, the only method was to do a memory-range-search while Direct Connected together, but how could he ask such a thing in thing in this situation?

'No—Wait, wait.'

Haruyuki quickly jumped at the idea that suddenly flashed through his mind.

Because it's such a situation, couldn't he ask it? It was inexcusable to Chiyuri, but—No, he wasn't particularly tricking her. He would apologize sincerely, and at the same time check her memory a little while synced...

"Ah, ah, uuum, Ch-Ch-Chiyuri!"

Haruyuki cried that out as he intensely stumbled over his words, which was acted on his part.

"Wh...What is it?"



"That is...I-I've come to a-apologize about various things...like the sandwich incident, and the incident in front of the school gates. B-B-But, I'm not very good at talking with my mouth like this, so, umm...please D-D-D-Di-Direct Connect with me."

Chiyuri stared opened-mouth at Haruyuki's face, which had sweat that certainly wasn't part of an act sliding down it.

The angle of her plump eyebrows rose even more as she went from surprised to suspicious.

No good, this was just too abrupt, after all. As Haruyuki resolved himself to being yelled at, a strangely defiant look appeared on the face of his childhood friend. That—was the face that Chiyuri had always shown in the past when quarrelling with boys, which basically said "Just try it if you dare".

"...Did you bring a cable?"

As shed suddenly asked that with a stiff voice, Haruyuki shook his head while thinking "Oh no".

"Err...I-I didn't bring it."

"Fu~n. Just so you know, I don't have anything except this."

Bending her body forward and opening a case underneath her bed, what Chiyuri took out was a mere thirty centimeter off-white XSB cable.

"S-Short. Do you...always use that with Taku...?"

When he unconsciously asked that, she immediately started yelling at him.

"A-Are you an idiot!! Takkun carries a one-meter one. This is the cable for connecting to a PC that was attached when I bought my Neuro Linker!!"

"Ah...aah..."

Because the super-fast communication standard Xtra-Serial-Bass (XSB) required a high-grade cable that was securely sealed, the ones that attached as bonus equipment were always short. But even so, wasn't thirty centimeters a bit too short? What a stingy manufacturer.

Effortlessly tossing the cat tail-like cable over to Haruyuki who was thinking about escaping, Chiyuri snorted lightly and rolled her small bad onto the bed.

"Do what you want."

Not knowing what to do with the cable in his hand that was like a burning wire, Haruyuki spoke nervously.

"U-Umm...if possible, err, could you please sit on a chair with your back facing me...?"

No response. Chiyuri didn't seem to intend to move even an inch as she laid sprawled on the sheets.

Haruyuki quite seriously thought 'Hmm, should I run and escape?', but he had already done that in front of Kuroyukihime today. If he ran away again here, the situation would reach the point of being impossible to fix.

"...T-Then..."

Having made up his mind, Haruyuki shuffled over to the bed that Chiyuri was lying on, and took off his slippers.

Slo~wly, he put one knee on the white-and-gray striped sheets.

The sturdy-seeming pipe frame of the bed protested with a creaking sound at the weight that was several times heavier than it was used to.

Once he had crawled forward on all fours until he was within seventy centimeters away from Chiyuri's ride side, Haruyuki first placed the plug at one end of the cable into the outer connection port that was on the right side of his Neuro Linker in the back.

Then, he tilted his head at an unnatural angle and held out the plug at the other end while stretching it to its limits. However, the port of the closed-eyed and lying Chiyuri was still practically a light-year away from him.

'Ugeeeh, oh no, I should have approached from the left instead. Should I draw back and approach again, no there isn't that kind of psychological room left anymore, but even so it's absolutely impossible for me to go to the other side by crossing over Chiyuri.'

Having fallen 90% into a panicked state, Haruyuki tilted just his upper body in a very precariously balanced posture and forcibly brought their necks closer to each other. A sweet smell like that of milk drifted from Chiyuri's body, and his sense of balance became unsteady—

Immediately afterwards, his left knee slipped. Just before he pressed against Chiyuri's slender body with his large build, his outstretched hand was just barely enough to stop his fall.

Nonetheless, the situation was on the brink of a crisis. With his left knee in the space between Chiyuri's spread out legs and his left hand having landed right next to Chiyuri's right cheek, his body was being supported in a dangerous position. Uooooaaah, what's with this situatioooooooooon, as the needle of his panic meter swung into the red zone, Chiyuri's eyes, which were only ten centimeters away from him, blinked open.

Haruyuki couldn't read the expression that was in her big light brown pupils. Of course, there was anger and irritation in them. But, that seemed to have less to do with Haruyuki's current insolent conduct—somehow, it seemed like she had been biting back those feelings for quite a long time—

Unable to endure gazing at each other's eyes any longer, Haruyuki moved his right hand and inserted the plug into Chiyuri's neck. The Wired Connection warning that appeared hid Chiyuri's face from view for a moment.



—The delay wasn't more than a second, but even so Haruyuki somehow managed to reorganize his thoughts in that time.

Blinking several times, he turned his gaze away from Chiyuri's eyes and fixed his focus around the slender collarbone that peeked out from the collar of her white sweater.

"Umm...I...came because I felt I didn't apologize about the matter the other day."

The words, composed through thought-speaking, resounded through both their sense of hearing without stumbling, despite their awkwardness.

"Umm, about spoiling that boxed lunch you went to such trouble to make...I'm, really sorry."

Though he was apologizing for that seriously—

Haruyuki moved his right hand's finger outside of Chiyuri's vision, and opened the storage icon.

In the window that opened and piled over half of the real Chiyuri's face, there was a folder that displayed Chiyuri's ID Name, next to a folder that displayed the physical memory range of her Neuro Linker.

At this point, it could be said that the possibility of Chiyuri = «Cyan Pile» was already exceedingly close to zero. Because if she were «Cyan Pile», Chiyuri should have already known that Haruyuki was «Silver Crow», an underling of Kuroyukihime, and therefore should have refused to Direct Connect with him.

Or—her intentionally laying down on the bed might be a ploy by Chiyuri to discourage Haruyuki from Direct Connecting with her. Right now, Chiyuri might be shocked and panicking in her heart.

While feeling ashamed of himself for suspecting the childhood friend he had known for ten years in that way, Haruyuki quietly moved the cursor over the physical memory folder of Chiyuri's Neuro Linker.

"But...but, I was a bit shocked."

As if to overwrite his guilty feelings, such words gushed out from my thoughts.

"When I imagine Chiyu and Taku...discussing the matter of those guys, I'm unable to contain myself...I understand that you're thinking about all those things for my sake...but I...."

-- —I just don't want to be pitied by Chiyuri and Takumu. Exactly because we're friends—I want the distance between the three of us to remain the same at least.

Though it's already too late.

Haruyuki put more strength into his finger, and clicked the folder.

At the same time as a differently colored and semi-transparent window suddenly opened, Chiyuri's voice sounded in both his head and ears.

"Haru...You misunderstood."

The clumsy Chiyuri seemed to be unable to do thought-speaking up until now. Right before Haruyuki's eyes, her small lips moved and more words followed.

"I didn't tell Takkun anything. I couldn't tell him. I promised to remain silent. Takkun only knew about the sandwich because, when I went to his kendo tournament the other day, I told him I would also make one for Haru next time."

"Eh..."

Haruyuki unconsciously turned his gaze away from checking the window and met Chiyuri's eyes. Her determined eyes suddenly softened, and her eyelashes turned as if yearning for the past in some way.

"...How many years has it been? Since Haru has talked about himself so much."

Avoiding eye contact with Haruyuki, who couldn't say anything, Chiyuri continued murmuring.

"I also... I was also dishonest. And cowardly. Even though Haru...was going through so much pain for such a long, long time, I could only pretend not to see. Even though there were so many things I could have done if I really felt like it. I could have told the teachers, written a letter to the school board, or asked Takkun and he would have beaten them all up. But I couldn't...I thought Haru would get angry at me and hate me...I was afraid that we couldn't be 'us' anymore."



Haruyuki held his breath as he watched a clear drop distinctly gather along the long eyelashes that bordered one of her eyelids. It was only two days ago that Chiyuri had cried as he knocked down her sandwiches, and even though they had both cried and made the other cry in the so many times they had quarrelled in the past, but he felt that the tears he saw now had a completely different hue from those times.

"But, Haru is also dishonest."

Squeezing her eyes closed, Chiyuri continued to speak with trembling lips.

"You said that it would never, never change. That we'd be the same friends. Two years ago...when I consulted with you about Takkun...Haru said that if I rejected him, Takkun wouldn't play with us anymore. But, Haru promised that, even if me and Takkun went out together, you would always stay as our friend. I...I just felt that I didn't want anything to change. I just wanted the three of us to always be together..."

——I also feel the same.

Haruyuki resisted vocalizing that thought at a dangerous moment.

But, as if she had heard him, Chiyuri opened her eyes and looked straight at Haru as drops scattered about.

"Yet...Why!? Why are you depending on that person now!? You told me to do nothing, yet why did you act like a servant and beg to that person!? You're so unfair...It's so frustrating, even though I always worried about you for so many years, that person...settled everything in just a single

day...And then, she acted as if Haru...was an object that belonged to her..."

That person—Kuroyukihime.

When the name of that person came out with unexpected timing, Haruyuki nearly forgot about checking Chiyuri's memory and shook his head while trembling.

"Th...That's not it, I didn't beg her...Senpai just resolved the bullying because she's the vice-president of the student council..."

"If that's the case, why does that person lead Haru around like you're her pet!? Why did Haru act small behind that person as if you're her underling!?"

"No...That's not how it is!"

While shaking his head vehemently again, Haruyuki tasted the feeling of wanting to ask himself "What on earth do I want to do?".

Before, he had stubbornly denied the claim that Chiyuri was «Cyan Pile» by Kuroyukihime, and this he was earnestly denying the accusations against Kuroyukihime by Chiyuri. The situation was similar to a jigsaw puzzle that had already been stirred around by a blender, and he couldn't imagine where and how to put it back together.

Even as the tone of his voice fell, Haruyuki repeated it again.

"That's not how it is. Because I don't particularly...hate it..."

"But I hate it!!"

Just then, Chiyuri cried out with a voice that could even be heard from outside the room.

"Haru, you were always cold ever since we entered middle school. You wouldn't go home with us at all, had an annoyed face when I talked to you at school, and you wouldn't even come over to my house anymore. You weren't like that in elementary school."

"That...couldn't be helped, because you already had a bo...boyfriend."

"Haru was the one that told me to do so!! Haru said that, if I did that, me, Haru and Takkun could stay together just like always!! Was that a lie!?"

"It wasn't a lie! It wasn't a lie, but...we can't stay as elementary students forever!!"

Clenching the sheets tightly on both sides of Chiyuri's face, Haruyuki also shouted.

"In the past, I didn't care about it, about walking alongside you and Taku, about entering a hamburger restaurant together! But...it's impossible anymore, it's too tough! Taku keeps getting more and more handsome, and you also keep getting cu...cuter, but I, the one walking next to you both, is like this! Even when we're in the same place, I feel like digging a hole and burying myself!!"

Until now, he hadn't openly confessed his inferiority complex to Chiyuri—no, to anyone. He firmly believed that he'd regret it to the point of dying later, but Haruyuki couldn't stop his thoughts no matter what.

If he tried to say the same thing with his mouth, he'd end up stuttering and be unable to get the words out. But right now, he was Direct Connected and using thought-speaking, so Haruyuki's had become a torrent and were pouring into Chiyuri's brain.

"You're the same! Even though you walk with Taku while holding hands, you can't do it with me! That shows that you yourself have chosen Taku! Whatever I say is just unrelated now!!"

From two centimeters below Haruyuki, Chiyuri's eyes widened as she listened to his monologue in silence.

Then, a silk curtain of water appeared under her pale-colored eyes again.

Her face distorted and a whisper-like voice leaked out from her intensely trembling lips.

"...Do you really feel that way? Do you seriously believe that a person's value is decided just by their appearance? ...Haru is always like that. You always act that way, criticizing scolding yourself. Why do you hate yourself like that? Why do you reproach yourself so much?"

"Hate myself...Of course I do."

Haru replied as if groaning.

"If I were anyone else, I would absolutely hate someone like this. Chubby, sweaty, servile...There's not a single thing to like about me. I would hate...just being seen together with me."

"I know it. I know a lot of good points about Haru. I know so many I can't count them all with the fingers of both my hands!"

Chiyuri continued while sobbing childishly like she did in the past.

"At snack time, you would always give me the bigger portion; when I lost the doll I hung on my school bag, you looked for it by yourself until late; whenever my Neuro Linker had problems with it, you would immediately fix it; you have so many good points that no one else has. It has nothing to do with your appearance. If...if that time two years ago, you had been the one to..."

Suddenly, after looking as if she was firmly swallowing something, Chiyuri smiled sadly.

"...I'm sorry, I shouldn't say this. I...I just feared that Haru was not only distancing himself from the kids at school, but also from me and Takkun. I didn't want you to be alone. I wanted you to feel that your two close friends were also here for you anytime. That's why I did as Haru said."

Haruyuki, while feeling the inside of his throat tighten up intensely, somehow squeezed out his thoughts.

"...Don't tell me, you did it for my sake...? So that me and Takkun could still be friends...?"

"It's because Haru seems to have the most fun when playing with Takkun. And it was the most fun for me, watching you two like that. I just thought that I wanted only this time not to change. But...it's impossible, there is nothing that doesn't change, and a person's heart doesn't stop."

Chiyuri suddenly lifted both her hands and put them around Haruyuki's large body, hugging him with all her strength.

She gave a tear-filled smiling face to the frozen Haruyuki from super-close distance.

"My hand can no longer reach Haru. To be honest, when I saw Haru and Kuroyukihime-san at the school gate, I thought..."Does that role perhaps belong to that person?". That was frustrating to me, because I believed that I knew many times more about Haru than that person. But...if that person has the power to change Haru...—"

While right in the midst of a great whirlpool of confusion, Haruyuki could only listen to Chiyuri's words. Sticking to him, Chiyuri's body hadn't changed at all since all those long, long years ago, it was still small and warm.

"...But, I'm begging you, please stop that kind of attitude. it's kind of hard to take in. You look like a follower. If that's how it is, try to become her boyfriend. And surprise the students in school that way."

'If I hugged Chiyuri tightly here and now, what would happen?'

It was only for a moment, but Haruyuki seriously considered that. Of course, his body didn't actually move, but just the fingertip of his right hand betrayed his thoughts, trembling.

The holo-cursor, which moved in reaction to that movement, by chance hit the icon of the Application Install folder in the window that indicated the contents of the internal memory of Chiyuri's Neuro Linker. After a brief delay, a new window silently opened.

While unconsciously the displayed application groups one by one with his gaze, Haruyuki likewise unconsciously murmured out loud with his natural voice. (Note: Voice-speak ends here.)

"Sorry...I'm sorry, Chiyu. Until now, I...didn't consider that you were worried by something, or that you were suffering. That's why I'm hopeless..."

"That's right. I also worry, Takkun also has things that worry him, and even that person is probably like that too. Including "that person". Everyone is the same, no different from Haru."

Both Chiyuri's voice and small hands were so warm that it seemed to soak into him.

Inside his mind, Haruyuki thought, 'How could I? How could I think for an instant that she was hiding being a Burst Linker from me?'

In fact, he had understood with one look that the icon symbolized by a flaming letter B wasn't in the Application folder. Just in case, he checked

each installed program, but he couldn't seem to find anything outwardly suspicious among the commercial mailers, media players and simple games.

Sure enough, Chiyuri wasn't «Cyan Pile».

While persuading himself of that, Haruyuki suddenly felt uneasy when he opened up the properties of some of the applications.

The programs weren't the problem. That wasn't it— just now, the response to the operation was subtly sluggish.

Rather than wirelessly communicating through the inexpensive home server, right now he was Direct Connected to Chiyuri's Neuro Linker with a high-grade cable (moreover, a very short one), so there was no reason for lags that could be sensed in the response to occur.

If there was a lag, the only possible cause was that the communication bandwidth of Chiyuri's Linker was mostly occupied by other circuits.

Becoming all the more suspicious of that, Haruyuki opened the network status window as well.

Chiyuri's Neuro Linker was currently connected to three networks, the Global Net, the Nakajima family's Home Net, and the Direct Connection with Haruyuki. Among that, the only packet exchange that should have been happening right at this moment was with Haruyuki.

However, as he checked her network, Haruyuki nearly cried out. A massive packets was being sent to the Global Net. The local sender was



an unidentified program that was installed under many layers of folders. The receiver on the global side was unknown. In other words, this was—

A Backdoor!!

Someone had hacked Chiyuri's Neuro Linker, and was secretly connecting to it from the outside. And that person was right at this instant stealing Chiyuri's sight and hearing information.

This bastard!!

While nearly shouting unconsciously, Haruyuki began to move his fingertip in order to erase the problematic application.

But he stopped himself just before he threw the icon he was dragging into the garbage can.

The person connecting right now had to be «Cyan Pile». Without a doubt, this guy hadn't succeeded in altering Brain Burst, but rather he was using Chiyuri's Neuro Linker as a step-point in order to allow himself to freely appear and disappear on the matching list.

In other words, if he could trace the packet's destination, the true identity of «Cyan Pile» would also become clear. However, tracing without being sensed by the other side was difficult work. The only chance would most likely be while they were in battle. For that to happen, he would have to hide the fact that he had noticed the backdoor until that person next attacked.

Quietly letting out a breath, Haruyuki closed all the windows.

"...Thank you, Chiyu."

He murmured that and quietly separated their bodies.

Still crying a little, Chiyuri also slowly dropped her hands, smiled while nodding. As he returned an awkward smile, Haruyuki stretched out his left hand and removed the plug from Chiyuri's Neuro Linker.

## Chapter 6

Friday.

Haruyuki trudgingly walked along the sidewalk with his shoulders drooped dejectedly among the other students, who were going to school with shining expressions at the prospect of the holiday the day after tomorrow after the long week finally ended.

"A guy... a guy like me..."

He mumbled to himself, filled with maximum self-loathing so early in the morning.

If the dream he had on the night of installing Brain Burst was the scariest one of his life, the dream he had last night would have to be the lowest and most disgusting one. If the other person, who had done things he only knew about through virtual knowledge, has just been Kuroyukihime, it might have been the best dream he had ever had. But before he knew it, the number of people in the dream increased to two, and the second person was—.

"Auu...aaa..."

He desperately pushed back the urge to grab his head and run.

Currently, the producers of Neuro Linkers were said to be ruthlessly competing to create a truly dream-like application called «Dream

Record». It was a good thing that it didn't exist yet. No—well, he had to admit that part of him was disappointed about that...

"Hey, good morning, boy!"

Haruyuki jumped as somebody greeted him cheerfully with a slap on his shoulder.

Then he jumped again after turning around and seeing the beauty in black standing there.

"Hwuaaa?!"

"...What was that? Is it a greeting that's popular these days?"

Kuroyukihime had a dubious expression on her face. Haruyuki shook his head.

"No, it-it's nothing!! Umm, go-good morning, senpai!!"

"...Hmmm."

Kuroyukihime cocked her head once more, then coughed slightly and spoke again.

"Hmm—. Ahh—. Well, I... apologize about yesterday. I wasn't being very mature."

"N-no... there's no way it's like that, it's nothing of the sort. I should be the one apologizing... I went home without even saying goodbye properly..."

As the two of them stopped speaking, students wearing the same uniform slowly started milling around them. Not just first years but even second and third years were waiting to greet Kuroyukihime with looks of admiration in their eyes, and before they knew it, a line had formed behind them.

Having seen this, Kuroyukihime finished her greetings in one fell swoop by shouting "Hey, good morning everyone!" to all the people in the back, and then tapped Haruyuki on the back and hurried off. She continued the conversation, whispering in Haruyuki's ear after he had hastily caught up with her.

"No... of course you wanted to get away. I had treated your precious... friend, as a cowardly marauder. Because of that, I made you say something impossible, that you would check Direct Connecting. I sincerely apologize."

"Huh? Ah... Well, I did it... the Direct Connect."

"...What?"

Her face froze. She spoke even before Haruyuki could put up his guard. He had the feeling that something wasn't quite right.

"Where did you do it?"

She asked with an edge to her voice, so there was no choice but to answer truthfully.

"That-that is... at her house..."

"Where in the house?"

"I-in a room... He-her room."

"...Ho."

Kuroyukihime increased her pace for some reason. Haruyuki had to chase after a person with a much longer stride than him with sweat running down his brow. It took him a couple seconds to catch up and continue the conversation.

"So, I sneaked a peek at her memory... and in her Neuro Linker there was..."

"How long was the cable?"

Kuroyukihime asked with an aura that seemed to bore into him. Haruyuki answered timidly, feeling more and more frightened.

"Th...irty centimeters."

"...Hmph."

Taptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptaptap.

Haruyuki could only watch Kuroyukihime's long hair shake to and fro as she walked towards the school entrance ahead of them at a frightening pace.

I don't understand. This world is just full of things I don't get.

After seriously listening to the morning classes, half as a way of escape, and taking a mountain's worth of notes, Haruyuki couldn't himself to take any sort of action even when he heard the lunch bell ring.

If he thought about it logically, he should immediately go find Kuroyukihime and talk about the backdoor that «Cyan Pile» had installed in Chiyuri's Neuro Linker, as well as how to track the packet down. But before that, if he couldn't figure out the reason behind why Kuroyukihime had been acting strangely ill-humored since yesterday, he wouldn't be able to concentrate on the conversation.

It was true that he made people in front of him feel disgusted quite a lot. It would be more of a surprise if there was someone that didn't get annoyed at an overly obese guy that sweated like a waterfall and mumbled almost inaudibly. And the expression that conveyed that on the person's face would further intimidate Haruyuki and his voice would continue to get smaller until it became hard to even hear.

Perhaps Kuroyukihime had been secretly tolerating him until now. And perhaps she had finally gone past her limit.

If so, it would be better to give up talking to her face to face in real life. If they talked with their full dive avatars, he wouldn't sweat at least and the volume of his voice would be automatically compensated. Getting things done like this smoothly and efficiently would be the most desirable thing for him as well.

As Haruyuki kept telling himself this while gazing at the table, an unfamiliar and loud voice suddenly blared down from above his head.

"Hello! First year, Class-2 Arita Haruyuki-kun, right?"

He jerked his head up in surprise. Two girls whose faces he didn't know were standing in front of him. Both had a holo-tag on their shoulders that showed that they were in the middle of a club activity. [Newspaper club].

Geeh, a new icon flashed in Haruyuki's vision as he almost fell down in surprise. [SREC], that was an icon that told you that the other person was recording your conversation. Of course it wasn't something that was freely allowed, but it was allowed in very few instances within the school.

For example, collecting data for the newspaper club.

Haruyuki couldn't even look at his classmates who were watching with interest around him. He prepared to run away, disregarding how he would look. But, as if they were used to these sorts of situations, there was someone who stood behind him to block his escape route.

Right in front of Haruyuki who was frozen in a half-risen position, the attacking reporter pushed out her hand that was holding a holo-board and threw out the question which struck at the heart of the matter.

"This is Umesato Real Times, «Head☆shot to that guy in the rumors» corner!! Well to get straight to the point, is the rumor that Arita-kun is going out with that famous Kuroyukihime-san true!?"



Haruyuki glanced at the blinking recording icon.

Then, he concentrated all his mental power and managed to reply in what could be called a calm voice.

"It's a lie. A rumor. Groundless."

The reporter typed furiously on her invisible keyboard in front of her and then launched a counter-attack.

"But according to the information we have gathered, Arita-kun has direct connected with Kuroyukihime-san twice in the lounge and even did a non-stop Direct Connect date in a café within the school district!"

"Wha..."

Looking down at Haruyuki who was shocked and thinking "Why do you know that?", the female student made light flash across her real glasses, which were a rare thing these days.

This was bad, really bad. If he answered wrong here, it would become something that can't be taken back.

Several sensational headlines appeared in his head. He could even hear the battle cry of the Kuroyukihime fan club as they saw that and swore bloody punishment.

With one of his cheek twitching and convulsing in spasms, Haruyuki made his brain think three times faster than the time he had fought «Ash Roller» and came up with an answer that seemed innocent enough.

"Eh—, w-w-well that is. I-I-I know quite a lot about Neuro Linker operating systems, and umm, senpai's Neuro Linker was in bad shape, so I just fixed it for her when she asked me to, and the thing in the café was nothing more than compensation for that. There wasn't anything else to it, really, not even a little."

As he shook his head with a stiff smile, the newspaper club member stopped typing and frowned.

Even if they saw them direct connecting, it was impossible to tell if they had talked through or if he had just fiddled with the Neuro Linker. It wasn't a great excuse but they wouldn't be able to refute it.

As Haruyuki calmed down, he kept talking to make his defense stronger.

"Be...Besides, if you look at how that person acts when she's with me you'll know. Senpai gets upset really easily when she talks with me. There's no way that she's going out with me."

With this, the interview was over.

That was what he thought, but the girl cocked her head and repeated his words as if suspicious of something.

"Upset? It didn't seem that way at all..."

"I-It's true! Even this morning, she went off by herself and was angry for some reason... She's always acts like that whenever I talk about Chiyu, I mean Kurashima..."

"Kurashima...san? You mean the girl who quarreled with Kuroyukihime over something at the school gate...?"

After blinking her sparkling eyes behind her glasses several times—

The newspaper club member's dramatic attitude suddenly vanished and moved her finger. The recording icon disappeared from Haruyuki's sight.

"...? Has the interview finished?"

"Erm, well... that is....."

After strangely faltering and exchanging glances with her partner behind her, she then continued to talk in what seemed to be her normal manner of speaking.

"Well, you see. The truth is, we were also skeptical and just came to collect data thinking it was just some silly mistake, but..."

"Yes...?"

The girl brought her face closer and whispered low enough so that only Haruyuki could hear.

"Hey, Arita-kun. It couldn't really be... well this is what I think... but maybe, are you and Kuroyukihime, really... like that?"

"Haah!?"

"Well, y'know, if she gets upset every time you talk about that Kurashima-san who's close to you, that's, well... you know?"

The other club member who stood next to her continued.

"Yeah. That, the only thing it could be is..."

Then both of them whispered to Haruyuki at the same time as if they were oracles from a temple.

"...jealousy, right?"

When Haruyuki recovered his state of mind, Haruyuki found himself in his usual cubicle in the men's restroom.

In the end, he had run away, but he didn't have the luxury of mind to feel remorse for what he had done.

'Jealousy? With what characters is that written with? I don't know of any such word in Japanese.'

He wanted to run away from his thoughts like that, but the kanji to spell it was already etched into his mind like a red hot iron brand.

The reason that Kuroyukihime showed a displeased face when they talked of Chiyuri was because of...jealousy.

Yes, that's what the two of them had said.

Jealousy. Envy. In other words, Kuroyukihime had not been acting or joking, but had seriously been—

"It's a lie."

Haruyuki rushed ahead of where his thoughts were going and muttered that. There was no way that was true. It might happen to other people but to him, Arita Haruyuki, such a thing cannot happen. Don't think like that. Don't wish for it. If he did, he would, without a doubt, toss and turn in his bed while regretting it two to three times more.

Haruyuki banged the back of his head on the flush tank behind him and told himself again.

"It's a lie...a lie."

But the more he kept telling himself that, the more the little actions, expressions and words Kuroyukihime had showed and told him flickered through his mind.

That time...and that time, and that time, did that person really...?

".....It's a lie!!"

Bang! Haruyuki punched the cubicle wall and hugged his head.

It was painful to even continue thinking now, he wanted to run away from here more than ever, but—at the instant he was going to give the command for Full Dive.

He remembered the crazy high score that Kuroyukihime had managed to achieve in virtual squash.

He could never exceed that score. If so, he couldn't use that game to escape from reality anymore.

"...Why."

He muttered again, a little louder this time.

"...Why!? Why me!?"

You have everything. Looks, brains, physical skills, social graces, and even—the one thing I really prided myself on, reaction speed in virtual games.

In comparison, I am just a dislikable person with a flabby and sweaty body along with a stupid face.

In other words, I didn't have anything that was better than you.

"And yet...why did you say that you believed in me...?"

Of course Haruyuki was the person with an aptitude for Brain Burst that Kuroyukihime had been looking so hard for.

But even then, there were three of them in the same middle school, it meant nothing more than that.

Furthermore Haruyuki's «Silver Crow», with its huge helmet head attached to tall and thin wire-like body, had no skills beyond kicking, punching and headbutting. With a duel avatar like that, he wouldn't be of any use other than finding out the identity of the enemy—«Cyan Pile». In that case, he wanted to be suitably treated according to that. He wanted to just be commanded calmly, indifferently, as a chess piece.

He didn't wish for anything more than that. He wouldn't have dreamed of anything more than that. Yet—why, why did Kuroyukihime act like that, make such expressions, and look at him with such eyes?

Finally Haruyuki decided to cling onto the single conclusion with the sole wish to set his mind at rest. It didn't seem as if he would be able to find any reason other than that now.

Although the person who had extorted food money from him had already disappeared, Haruyuki had skipped lunch, but he wasn't conscious of being hungry and just passed through the afternoon classes indifferently.

In homeroom, the teacher seemed to have talked about Araya and his gang, but Haruyuki ignored that too, and after the other students rushed out of the classroom just as the school bell rang and in high spirits in anticipation of the weekend, he stood up slowly with his bag in his hand.

He then slowly walked to the entrance, changed his shoes and left the school building.

Even though it was only just past 3 o'clock in the afternoon, the late autumn sun was already a deep red and had sharply gone down in the sky, illuminating the school gates. Catching sight of a black silhouette standing there as if absorbed into the gatepost, Haruyuki approached while dragging his feet.

"...Hey."

Kuroyukihime stopped her hand, which had been typing on a holo-keyboard, and raised one small hand along with a slightly stiff smile. Probably, she had expressly taken out the work which she should have dealt with in the student council room here in this uninteresting place.

In contrast, Haruyuki just bowed his head silently.

An awkward silence instantly descended between them. A cold wind passed through them, rustling the leaves at their feet.

As Haruyuki still hanged his head, Kuroyukihime lightly cleared her throat and then continued speaking.

"...Let's talk as we walk."

"Ok."

Haruyuki nodded as he gave a faint response.

Kuroyukihime walked silently, while Haruyuki followed a step behind on her left as they walked out of the school gate.

After walking for a minute or two without talking to each other, Kuroyukihime began to speak after clearing her throat after clearing her throat once more.

"Umm...That is, I'm very sorry for this morning. I had a strange attitude."

"No, I...don't particularly mind. I should apologize too, for not coming to find you during lunch time."



After hearing that unusually smooth reply from Haruyuki, Kuroyukihime seemed to tilt her head slightly, but then nodded.

"Then, it's fine, but...Umm. Even I don't know what exactly came over me, but...yes, when it comes to talking about «Cyan Pile», I'm unable to keep my calm."

With her gaze set straight ahead, Kuroyukihime kept talking just a little fast—

Haruyuki cut her words off with a dry voice.

"About that. I've found the connection between «Cyan Pile» and Kurashima."

"...Eh? Ah...I-I see. Then, let's talk about it through direct connect. Since someone might hear what we say."

Kuroyukihime spoke quickly, and searched through the bag hanging on her right hand instead of her pocket.

What she pulled out was a small paper bag that had the name of a store within Umesato on it. Breaking off the tape with a stinging noise, Kuroyukihime drew out a new XSB cable from the bag.

"Ah, I accidently broke the cable that we used yesterday. So...I didn't have a lot of money with me, and could only buy this."

Haruyuki purposely ignored Kuroyukihime's explanation, which sounded like an excuse, as she held out a 1-meter cable—the shortest size sold in

stores. Without meeting her eyes, he silently took the plug at one end of the cable and inserted it into his Neuro Linker.

"....."

Kuroyukihime seemed to be waiting for Haruyuki to say something, but eventually she inserted the plug at the other end into her own Neuro Linker. As the Wired Connection warning appeared and then disappeared, Haruyuki sent out his dry thoughts to her.

"Kurashima isn't «Cyan Pile» herself. «Cyan Pile» has installed a virus in Kurashima's Neuro Linker and made a Backdoor inside it. That's why he appears on the stage from the coordinates where Kurashima is within the school."

After Haruyuki had spoken up to that point, Kuroyukihime did not respond immediately.

Eventually, her voice sounded through the center of his brain, sounding suspicious, or perhaps just a little scared.

"...Did something happen to you...? Somehow...you've been a bit strange since earlier."

"Not really...nothing's wrong."

Haruyuki responded to Kuroyukihime as she walked beside him 1 meter away, obstinately not turning to look at her.

"But...—Could it be that you're angry? Because I acted strangely this morning and yesterday...?"

"No way. There's no reason for me to be angry at senpai...I'm fine, so let's return to the important discussion here."

Once again, only silence flowed through the thin cable.

With dusk approaching, the sidewalk was dim and gloomy from the group of buildings lined up to the left, and the people who came and went were all sunk into black shadow. No one paid attention to Haruyuki and Kuroyukihime as they walked while direct connected, it was as if there was just the two of them, wandering through a calm country of shadows.

"...Do you have evidence that proves this?"

Abruptly, a thought that had suddenly changed to cold resounded in Haruyuki's mind.

"Do you get a hold of evidence that proves that Kurashima-kun really isn't «Cyan Pile»?"

"No. If I touched the virus, there was the danger of them noticing, so I just checked it."

"Ho. That's a calm decision, but at the same time it lacks persuasive power. Even I've never heard of something like connecting to Brain Burst via a Backdoor virus, so how should I believe your words?"

As she kept composing her words, Kuroyukihime's thoughts became more and more sharp. Haruyuki clenched his teeth firmly and replied in an even more monotone voice.

"So in other words, you're pointing out the possibility that I made up the story about the virus... in short, that I changed sides over to Kurashima, «Cyan Pile»? If that's the case, it isn't about evidence or the like. How the matter is judged all depends on what senpai decides." "...I never said any of that. You're thinking too much."

Kuroyukihime's words shook a little, but Haruyuki obstinately gave nothing in reply to that.

"—Are those really your heart-felt words?"

Kuroyukihime's feet suddenly stopped and she spoke with a stiff voice that made the temperature quickly fall.

"The instant I concluded that you had gone over to «Cyan Pile», I would hunt you, take away all of your Burst Points, and drive to forced uninstallation of Brain Burst . You would forever lose the ability to accelerate. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"I understand. I'm just an ordinary chess piece, an ordinary tool for you to freely use as you like. When I'm no longer needed, I'll be thrown away."

"...You..."

Suddenly, Haruyuki's left shoulder was lightly seized.

When he looked up, Kuroyukihime's face was close to him, strained hard like a work of ice.

"You really are angry with me. Certainly, I haven't been perfect either. I apologize for that. But."

Her lips faintly trembled, and she squeezed her words in a forcibly restrained voice.

"...I also can't freely control all my emotions. When I get irritated, I also think anxiously. Especially concerning you...and Kurashima-kun..."

Hiding her gaze for a moment, Kuroyukihime tried to continue speaking as her pale cheeks stiffened.

"...Very well, if you wish to know the reason, I'll tell. I..."

Before he received her thoughts through the cable, Haruyuki turned his head to the side and cut her off.

"It's fine, just stop it already."

"Eh...W-What...?"

"It's also tough to watch it. It's painful to see."

"What are you talking about...What do you...mean?"

While fixing his gaze on a single pavement tile on the lower-right, Haruyuki spoke out loud the «only conclusion» he had arrived at earlier today.

"You...hate yourself, don't you?"

The sound of a sharp intake of breath.

Haruyuki was conscious of the fact that the words he was giving shape to right now could not be taken back.

In his ear, he faintly heard Chiyuri's encouragement from last night like a refrain, but he could no longer stop thoughts he was letting out.

"You hate yourself for being too perfect in everything. So you purposely try to diminish yourself. Isn't that right?"

Kuroyukihime's fingers which were holding his shoulder stiffened hard, as if they had become iron. While thinking that "This will be our last contact", Haruyuki threw out the last words which would destroy everything.

"By speaking to me...to a fat, unattractive and unlikable person like me, by touching my hand, by showing kindness...or rather, showing something like kindness to me, you were just trying to dirty yourself...Even if you don't do those things, I will still do as you say. I don't wish for anything else. I don't need compensation. Being just a pawn, just a tool to be ordered about, is suitable treatment for someone like me, you should also understand that!!"

Slowly—Slowly, the white hand left his shoulder.

'That's fine.'

'Without touching me, nor meet my eyes again.'

'Without even facing me in the real world, just make me into an ordinary tool.'

Haruyuki didn't know whether those feelings reached her as thought.

'Goodbye.'

Just as he murmured that at the end.

Slap!!

A sharp sensation hit his left cheek.

Feeling a burning heat, Haruyuki raised his face in astonishment.

"...Idiot!!"

That word came from her pale lips as real sound.

Dumbfounded, Haruyuki watched as tears poured out like a waterfall on that face that was twisted to its limits, yet was still extremely beautiful.

While still in the stance of having waved her left hand in a big way, Kuroyukihime's face and entire body became crumpled and disheveled like an infant, and she kept shedding tears without interruption.

"Idiot...Idiot..."

The sound of that repeated word seemed different from the «idiot»<sup>[10]</sup> with a mature and wry smile he had heard up until now.

As a single girl of suitable age—of 14-year-old, Kuroyukihime had abused Haruyuki so, so many times.

And Haruyuki, without even some responses that a 13-year-old boy should be able to do coming to mind, just stood there stock-still and wide-eyed.

The words he spoke had deeply injured the person in front of him. He understood that.

However, Haruyuki had thought that, if it's Kuroyukihime—if it's this person, who is perfect in everything and possesses a reasoning and ability to think beyond that of adults, she would simply hate Haruyuki, be disgusted with him and separate her heart from him.

To think that she would cry so much. That she would have such a fragile face. Such a—such a possibility was...

Haruyuki opened his mouth as he tried to say something.

Kuroyukihime covered her flowing tears with both hands.

Only a momentary breeze passed by them as they stood on the sidewalk as it sunk into the color of dusk.

Immediately after that—

The dreadful sound of metal striking metal hit Haruyuki's ears.

At first, he thought that it was quantum noise that originated from the Neuro Linker.



As Haruyuki was shocked and his heart jumped, he turned his neck and upper body to the right.

What burst into his field of vision was—a terrible sight.

A white car, as it cut down the guardrail that separated the road and the sidewalk with its left front fender, was hurtling straight towards him.

An accident!? No! He couldn't hear the sound of brakes.

Those four thoughts flashed through Haruyuki's mind in less than 0.1 seconds.

His mouth moved almost automatically and sent out one word. And at the same time, the same words sounded in his mind through the direct connect cable with a voice completely different from his own

""Burst-Link!""

Bashiiiiiiii!!

Along with a sound similar to thunder, the world stopped.

Blue.

A frozen scene, that was transparently blue as far as one could see.

But, Haruyuki was immediately conscious of that fact that it wasn't completely stopped.

The tires of the large sedan that was driving right before his eyes, as if resisting the freeze, were tuning little by little, little by little, gnawing on the road surface and decreasing the distance between them

*...Uwaaah!?*

Though a little late, Haruyuki screamed and sprang back. Instantly, the form of the car vanished. Hiding it from view was his—roundish back, wearing the Umesato middle school uniform.

This blue world wasn't simply a scene of reality. The Brain Burst program was hacking the images from the countless Social Security cameras installed in the surroundings streets and reconfiguring them as a polygon-made pseudo-reality.

Turning his gaze down a little, he saw that his body had changed into a pink pig. Moving his familiar virtual avatar, Haruyuki went around the back of his real self and saw the white sedan once more.

There was only three meters of distance between Haruyuki and the car, which had slantingly gone outside of the road and crashed through the gap between guardrails. Also, judging from its speed as it gradually but steadily advanced forward, it would come into contact with the two of them in less than ten minutes within this accelerated world.

For such a thing to happen—Why!?

Haruyuki thought desperately within his confused mind.

It was normally impossible for a car to deviate away from the road. Because, the instant an abnormal course was detected, the control AI of the car would take the driving authority away from the driver and automatically perform a course correction, deceleration and stop.

In other words, this car's control AI must have been broken, or temporarily stopped by the driver manipulation.

Most likely the latter, as Haruyuki quickly surmised. Because his ears couldn't hear the screeching sound of the tires chafing against the road surface due to full braking at all.

The driver wasn't stepping on the brakes. Rather, he was plunging forward by accelerating full throttle.

This was an intentional attack. Kuroyukihime had hinted at it before, about «attacks» on the side of reality by Burt Linkers.

Was the attacker an unknown Burst Linker belonging to the legion of a «King»? Or was the person at Umesato middle school, «Cyan Pile»?

Most of the surrounding social security cameras didn't seem to catch the image of the car's interior, and the window couldn't be seen through easily. Haruyuki changed angles, strained his eyes and finally found a position where he could peek into the interior.

After raising the short pig avatar to its full height, he saw that the driver, who had almost collided with the car hood, was—

“Wha...!?”

The instant he saw, Haruyuki once again let out an astonished cry that was similar to a scream.

The one inside there was the face of a classmate that he recognized completely and had never wanted to see again.

"A...Araya...!? Wh...Why..."

Why was this guy here.

Because of the assault event he had caused inside school and the things that had been discovered in his Neuro Linker as a result, including the game of illegally copying the social security camera-avoidance application, images and even virtual drugs, he had simply been arrested without any question. Like that, he had been thrown into the juvenile institution of the Discrimination Office for the time being—at the very least, he shouldn't be returning to our school.

Not believing his eyes, Haruyuki blinked several times and stared at the icy blue face of the attacker.

However, that needle-like hair that stood up on end, those raised-up thin eyebrows, those lips that were twisted in cruel excitement—and the feeling of fear that all those features forcibly created inside Haruyuki, all these things told him that the person in front of him really was Araya.

"This morning—he was given bail."

A said voice spoke out suddenly next to him, and Haruyuki quickly turn his face.

Kuroyukihime, wearing the body of her black swallowtail butterfly-like fairy princess avatar, stood there biting her lip.

"...I'd hear that he was going to have a trial in family court next week and would be imprisoned for one year at least...That's why I that it was no long necessary to worry about this man anymore. But...to think he would do such a..."

After murmuring that with a stifled voice, Kuroyukihime hid her long eyelashes and shook her head.

"No—I should have anticipated and watched out for this. One doesn't need the power of «acceleration» to attack someone...I should have known that a knife or car is more than enough, but...it seems I didn't truly understand that..."

As she said that in her usual tone, any lingering of the childish crying from before couldn't be seen on Kuroyukihime's face.

'No, that's simply what I want to believe' is what Haruyuki immediately rethought.

In the eyes of her avatar, of what should have just been a constructed image, a keen regret and something like resolution could be clearly seen.

Kuroyukihime slowly closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and then spoke in a whisper.

"This...is something like a punishment. For me, who didn't understand the hearts of people, nor tried to understand them, and yet still kept toying with them for amusement."

"...Wh...What...What are you saying?"

Haruyuki barely managed to say just those words. Kuroyukihime didn't responded immediately, and instead turned towards Haruyuki and quietly kneeled her avatar, whose height was double his own.

Spreading her black dress on the ground, she went down to the same height as Haruyuki and gazed straight at him.

"Arita-kun...Haruyuki-kun."

Her voice now was kinder than any other moment in his memory, gently stroking Haruyuki's hearing.

"I'm sorry. The one who caused this situation was me. But, I won't let you get hurt. I'll definitely protect you."

"...Eh...Wh...What..."

Dumbfounded, Haruyuki repeated the same words as before.

Even if they undid the acceleration now, there should be nothing they could do.

The instant they returned to reality, the sedan before them would cross the distance between them with dreadful speed and would splatter first Haruyuki, and then Kuroyukihime from behind.

Good thing that it was in that order. If he became a cushion, there was the slight possibility that it would end without Kuroyukihime being greatly injured. Haruyuki had already thought of that.

But, Kuroyukihime said something shocking with a tone that hid a strong resolution.

"I can definitely save just you. I haven't told you yet, the greatest and final power of Burst Linkers...of «acceleration»."

"Eh...!?"

Save me...? You, my master, save me, a mere tool...?

Haruyuki held his breath and vehemently shook his head left and right.

"Y...You can't!! You can't do that!! If there's such a power, I'll use it! And I'll protect you!! Because I'm your chess piece...it's only natural that I have to protect you!!"

He stretched out his short arms and desperately cried out.

"Please teach it to me...What is this final power!? With what kind of command is it used!?"

"It's no good. This command can't be used if one isn't Level 9 or above, and it consumes 99% of one's accumulated points. And before that—I am your «parent». How could a parent not protect its «child»?"

"Bu...But...But, but!!"

"Don't make that kind of face. Because to me as well...in this situation, there is just one saving grace."

"Eh...s-saving grace...?"

"Yes. In this moment, and as my last words, you'll believe what I saw, right?"

Kuroyukihime quietly lifted both of her hands, overlapped her open palms together, and put them against her chest.

Closing her eyes, a smile like a blossoming flower bud appeared on her lips, and—

She slowly said a single sentence, a single sentence, like a falling jewel.

"Haruyuki-kun. I love you."

From within her lifted eyebrows, those black pupils looked at Haruyuki while giving off an infinite radiance.

"It's the first time I've felt this way in my life. I just feel so confused without being able to really control myself. Even when I'm at school or lying down in bed at home, I'm always thinking of you, becoming happy, and becoming sad. This is the thing called love, huh...How wonderful this is. It's like miracle."

Clenching both hands in front of her chest, Kuroyukihime smiled.

That smile was warm, kind, and pleasant, but it pierced through Haruyuki's chest with a splitting pain.



I want to believe. I want to believe.

I want to believe—

The tears which overflowed from his avatar's eyes distorted Haruyuki's vision with too strong of an effect.

With a jerk, Haruyuki wiped them away and looked at the two eyes that were so close, and then asked with a blurred voice.

"Why...Why me? Why someone...someone like me?"

"Hmm, a reason, huh. There are an uncountable number of reasons, but...No, I don't think a reason is needed for love, but alright. Then, I'll just tell you the trigger."

Smiling Kuroyukihime stretched out her hands and put them on Haruyuki's shoulders.

"Haruyuki-kun. Do you remember our first meeting?"

"Yes...of course, of course I remember it. In the local net...in the Virtual Squash room, you said it to me. 'Do want to accelerate further ahead?'"

"That's right. The high score I made in that game..."

Her smile changed and became just a little mischievous.

"I used «acceleration» to achieve that."

"Eh...Eh!?"

"If I didn't use it, I wouldn't be able to achieve that kind of score at all. I did it thinking to attract your interest and easily persuade you, because you would want to improve yourself at any cost...I..."

There, Kuroyukihime paused in her speech a little, and turned her gaze towards the sky of the accelerated world.

"I became a Burst Linker only six years ago at eight years-old. Since then, I craved for only strength and speed and became Level 9 by cutting down so many enemies it can't be counted, and yet even so I dyed these hands in the blood of friends without being satisfied. There is no way that someone like me could possibly achieve the high score you carved out."

Changing her expression and looking straight at Haruyuki with strong eyes, Kuroyukihime continued speaking.

"Listen well, Haruyuki-kun. You are fast. You can become faster than anyone. Faster than me—than the other Kings. Speed is a Burst Linker's greatest power. One day, you'll become known far and wide as Accel World's fastest Linker. You'll take down the Kings, cross beyond even the surface of the earth, and reach the origin of Brain Burst. And I know. That you'll reach the ultimate potential hidden within people...within our minds and souls."

Nodding slowly just once, Kuroyukihime continued further.

"I...When I saw your figure as you play that game, I trembled. I shivered as I never had before, and was moved. Inside my heart, I cried out, 'To

think a person could be this fast. Eureka...Finally I had found the true King, who will once more accelerate this stagnant world.”

Haruyuki could only listen dumbfoundedly to her words now.

‘I’m, faster than anyone...?’

He couldn’t just suddenly believe that. But, in this situation right now, he didn’t allow him to doubt even a piece of the words that Kuroyukihime told him. That was the only thing he could absolutely not do.

“But, while you possess such strong power and potential, the real you is very fragile...so painfully so that it’s heartrending, and seemed to tear up my chest. I want to kneel before the future king. But, at the same time, I want to protect you and wrap you in my arms. Those contradicting feelings steadily swelled up inside me...and before I noticed, I only saw you. I was in love. I finally realized it yesterday.”

“Yester...day?”

“Yes. When you were talking about Kurashima-kun. How should I say it...By experiencing the thing known as jealousy for the first time in my life, I couldn’t control myself. I got that kind of attitude because of that. This morning too. I was too slow to notice...No, I was slow, but it’s not too late. Like this...”

Putting a bit more strength into her hands on Haruyuki’s shoulders and bringing her face close, Kuroyukihime smiled.

"Because I was able to confess. If could have a wish, I would have wanted to face you in reality and properly say it, but."

Jewel-like tears suddenly welled up in her glistening jet-black eyes, and collected into drops on the corners of her eyes.

"Now then...It's time to say farewell."

"What...what do you intend to do? No...saying farewell, that's just..."

As Haruyuki felt his breath catch and shook his head, she left her last words like an instruction.

"Please. Become stronger...And become faster. Beat the other «Kings» in my place, climb to the top and see what I wanted to see."

"No...No!!"

Haruyuki gave out a cry similar to a scream.

"I can't do that!! That's too...it's no good if only you leave! I'll protect you...If I can't do that, I'll go with you!! Please don't leave me...I've, I've still done nothing for you...not a thing..."

As Haruyuki spoke with a voice mixed with sobbing—

Kuroyukihime's lips quietly approached and closed up his mouth.

It was between virtual avatars, but that sensation was above all soft, warm, and gentle.



After that kiss that was a thousandth of a second in the real world, and also like an eternity in Haruyuki's perspective, their lips slowly separated and Kuroyukihime whispered.

"Someday...we will surely meet again."

On the track where she stood up, the drops of the tears she had spilled lined up in a silver radiance.

As Kuroyukihime faced the approaching car and blocked its path resolutely, an aura of incredible willpower rose from her back, while Haruyuki couldn't move or even speak.

She spread both her hands wide. Her back tightly straightened and—  
Kuroyukihime spoke out in a dignified voice.

"Physical Full Burst!!"

Paaah...!

Kuroyukihime's avatar was wrapped in dazzling white light, and then disappeared.

What? What had happened?

Exploding with confusion, uneasiness and a unnameable feeling that overwhelmed those other emotions, Haruyuki strained his voice and cried out.

"Senpai!!"

Brimming with tears again, he lost his sense of balance with his distorted vision and staggered back several steps.

And then, Haruyuki saw something he couldn't believe.

Kuroyukihime—the body of the real Kuroyukihime, while still under the blue permeation effect, was moving.

Kuroyukihime, who should have been standing in the back with the real Haruyuki interposed between her and the approaching car, put her foot forward at about 10% the speed of running in the real world but still definitely in a continuous movement, kicked off the ground and moved forward.

Such a thing—shouldn't be possible!!

The Brain Burst program overclocked the quantum signal by a thousand times using the heartbeat as its source and accelerated only the user's consciousness.

Conversely speaking, the effect of that didn't extend to the entire body. Therefore, even if one accelerated, it wasn't possible to move the body, let alone one's gaze. That's why the program, at the same time as one accelerated, separated the user's consciousness from their body by using Full Dive, and connected it with a pseudo-reality generated from the Social Security cameras.

Yet right now, the flesh and blood Kuroyukihime was moving her body at a speed which was so fast it could be clearly seen and confirmed by the

accelerated Haruyuki. Her ice-colored body sometimes blurred here and there as if flowing, perhaps because she had exceeded the photographing speed rate of the Social Security cameras.

In other words—her real-world self was dashing at a super-speed one hundred times that of an ordinary person!

So this was the greatest and final power of Brain Burst. Overclocking not only the consciousness, but the entire body, truly a forbidden command.

Doing such a thing, the body couldn't possibly finish it safely.

On the expression of the charging Kuroyukihime's face, along with resolved determination, there was stiffening as if she was mustering all her force of will to endure something.

That was most likely intense pain.

Her muscles and joints, which were being driven at an original impossible speed, must all be screaming simultaneously.

However, Kuroyukihime didn't stop.

With one, two, three steps, she lined up with the real Haruyuki's left side.

The front bumper of the Araya's car was now not even eighty centimeters away from Haruyuki.

Kuroyukihime lifted up both her hands and gently drew Haruyuki's body close to her, as if embracing him.



Putting in a little strength, she started to move Haruyuki's body as she pushed it to the side.

At the same time.

He felt a terrible impact through his whole body and his vision blacked out.

Kuroyukihime's movements were graceful, but in the real world it was equivalent to a body blow with that extreme speed. The safety mechanism of his Neuro Linker had activated from that shock, and automatically released the Full Dive.

In an instant, from the center of his darkened vision, the reality of regular colors returned as if enlarging outwards.

Haruyuki returned to his living body from his avatar in an instant, and right away he hit the pavement on his back, his breath stopping.

As Haruyuki forgot to even breathe again and opened his eyes wide, immediately in front of him was—

With both hands still extended forward, Kuroyukihime seemed to be smiling.

Immediately after, the white car which had fiercely crashed into the sidewalk collided with Kuroyukihime's slender body.

She was sent flying as if both her legs were scooped up by the bumper, then crashed against the front window and was thrown up even higher.

Her black hair flowed in the air while drawing an arc.

It caught the light of the sunset and shined orange.

Next to her, the pulled-out direct connect cabled danced and fluttered white.

## Chapter 7

Haruyuki's broken consciousness could only remember what happened afterwards in images of three colors.

The image of that slender form, lying on the brick tiles of the side walk and bent unnaturally—black.

The image of blood spreading out in fearfully large amounts under that body—red.

The image of those still closed eyelids, and of those cheeks which had lost their complexion—white.

The necktie Haruyuki used to stop the bleeding and his own hand were also dyed red in an instant.

The clothes of Araya, who crawled out from the driver's seat of the white car, which had crashed into the wall of a store while laughing manically, were also red.

A patrol came with its red lights flashing rushed onto the scene, and the still laughing Araya was forced into its backseat.

Immediately afterwards, a white ambulance with likewise red-flashing lights also arrived and the men in white who got off of it fixed Kuroyukihime onto a stretcher. At his urging, Haruyuki also rode with them and the ambulance had started driving at high speed—.

And now, Haruyuki was looking up at the ER's red in-operation lamp in a corner of a white hallway.

Until now, Haruyuki couldn't think about what had happened before.

The only thing that was floating in his mind was a replay of every moment over the past four days since he met Kuroyukihime.

That time too—that time too, and that time as well, Haruyuki should have been able to make different choices.

And if he had chosen that instead, this situation could have been avoided.

Why didn't he try to believe even a little in the hand that Kuroyukihime extended towards him, and the feelings she showed? If he had obediently accepted it without obstinately looking down, that quarrel between them on the road wouldn't have happened and they should have been able to notice the approaching car as well.

...Among all the mistakes I've repeated so many times in my life until now, I've made the number-one mistake that can't be undone.

Haruyuki went back to every crossroad among each fragment of his broken consciousness and tried to do down a different future one by one, but even Brain Burst couldn't change the past.

He continued doing that for who knew how long as he gazed up at the lamp.

The lamp indicated that they were still in the middle of operating, but suddenly the door slid open and a female nurse came out. Haruyuki simply looked at that form in a white gown as she then approached straight towards him.

She was a young nurse who seemed like she had just graduated from nursing school. As he faced her, who showed a strained expression under her beautifully arranged bangs, words flowed out almost of their own accord from Haruyuki's mouth.

"How...is it?"

"The doctor and all the staff are doing their best."

The nurse's voice was slightly hoarse and stiff.

"But...She has too many damaged organs. We fully injected repair-use micro-machines, and the deterioration of her conditions has somehow been delayed. And...that's right, about her family...we'd like to contact them, but there wasn't an emergency contact address registered in her Neuro Linker."

"Eh..."

Sitting next to Haruyuki who was at a loss for words, the nurse leaned forward and continued from there.

"I thought that you would know her home's telephone number. You're...her...?"

There was a questioning note at the end, but Haruyuki didn't respond at once.

What am I for that person? A chess piece, an underling. I don't want to use those kinds of words anymore. But now, I also don't want to refer to us as friends, or as senpai and kouhai.

Hesitating to speak, Haruyuki heard the words the nurse spoke after a moment's pause, and unconsciously looked up.

"...her boyfriend, right?"

"Eh...W-Why do you say that?"

Looking at the beauty of Kuroyukihime, which had miraculously not been damaged, and the physical appearance of Haruyuki, there shouldn't have been anything for her to draw such a conclusion from.

As Haruyuki reflexively shrank his body, he was quietly presented a small notebook.

Stamped with a metal emblem on its blue synthetic leather cover, it was the Umesato Middle School's student handbook.

"I saw it just now when I was looking for her phone number and confirming her personal effects. I'm sorry."

Wearing just a slight smile on her stiffened cheeks, the nurse opened the student handbook to the last page.

In the clear pocket on the left side, there was a student ID with a face-shot of Kuroyukihime.

And on the right side, there was a familiar round face.

Receiving the notebook with trembling hands, Haruyuki gazed at a picture of himself wearing an idiotic expression on his face. From that time—It was without a doubt the sight-capture picture she printed, from when he heard Kuroyukihime's first «confession» to him in the lounge.

With a dripping noise, a single drop of water fell onto the surface of the picture.

Haruyuki hadn't noticed that tears had been overflowing from his eyes for a while now.

"Senpai...Kuroyukihime-senpai."

His murmuring voice trembled greatly. It didn't take long for him to dissolve into crying like a child.

"Uu...aa...Uaaaaa!!"

Holding the notebook to his chest and bending forward, Haruyuki cried.

The tears flooded out one after another, and fell along his cheeks and onto the floor. Within the gouging-like pain his chest, Haruyuki found for the first time, in this moment now, his true feelings.

The operation continued for nearly five hours.

When the time indicator in the corner of his vision changed from evening to late night, Haruyuki simply sent a text mail saying "My friend was involved in an accident today, tonight I will return very late or not at all", and then simply returned to sitting on the chair.

Kuroyukihime's home seemed to have been contacted through the school, but surprisingly, instead of her family, only a family lawyer appeared by himself.

Equipped with large-type Neuro Linker and also like a machine himself, the middle-aged lawyer completed only the legal procedures in a very business-like manner, and then went away after about fifteen minutes without even casting a glance at Haruyuki.

After a long, long time pass, the red lamp finally was finally extinguished at around 10 PM.

The young doctor, who came out in an utterly exhausted state, looked a little confused at seeing Haruyuki alone in the hallway outside, but he still explained her condition in a polite tone.

They had succeeded in stopping the bleeding, but the damage to the internal organs was extensive, and it wouldn't be strange for her to fall into a state of shock.

The batch of synthetic protein micro-machines was going through tissue reconstruction and assimilation at full power, but in the end it depended on the patient's physical strength.



"...In short, I have to say that her present condition is serious. The next twelve hours will be the difficult part...Please prepare yourself."

When he finished saying that with a grave expression, the doctor left the hallway along with the staff.

The only person left was the female nurse from before.

Giving a brief glance to the student handbook still being grasped in Haruyuki's hands, the nurse spoke in a gentle tone.

"You should also...return home and rest. It seems that someone from her family will be coming tomorrow."

"Tomorrow...will be too late."

Haruyuki replied with a stubborn attitude that showed that he had no intention taking even one step away from this place.

"The doctor said that the next twelve hours would be the hard part. Even though senpai is doing her best, that no one would be at her side now, that's just...too cruel."

".....I see...That's true. Did you contact your home?"

"Yes...My parent won't be returning until around one o'clock anyway."

"I understand. Then, I'll bring you a blanket, please wait a moment."

Leaving for the nurses' station within the hallway with quick feet and then returning immediately, the nurse nodded firmly while handing a thin blanket to Haruyuki.

"Don't worry. That girl will surely be all right. She's so pretty...and has such a nice boyfriend like you. The fun things, it all starts from here."

Really—so many more things are "all starting from here" than you think. Defeating «Cyan Pile», taking down the legions of the other Kings, and going to the place that that persons is aiming towards. Of course, I also go with her.

While instantaneously thinking that, Haruyuki spoke.

"Th...Thank you very much. Umm...when can I meet with senpai?"

"It's impossible right now, since the micro-machine operation room has been air-sealed. But, you can see camera images of her via the hospital network. For this time only, a special privilege for you."

The nurse smiled, and manipulated her fingertip in the air. At the same time as she made a flicking gesture, an access gate appeared in Haruyuki's vision.

Haruyuki was a little surprised that he could wirelessly connect with the nurse's Neuro Linker even though they were cut-off from the Global Net, but he quickly realized that they were connected through the hospital's local network.

When he clicked on the icon, a video window was opened. The screen was dim and blurry, but by straining his eyes he noticed a bed with a strange shape in the middle.

It seemed to be a capsule with only its top-half transparent. A semi-transparent liquid filled its interior, and he could see a white body down to the shoulders soaking inside it.

The tubes that were connected to the arms and mouth were painful to look at, and the eyelids remained closed without even a flutter.

"Senpai..."

Right now, inside that delicate body, countless micro-machines and her life-force were fighting against huge damage. Haruyuki could do nothing to help in that battle. There's was nothing he could do, but pray.

"Don't worry. She'll definitely be saved."

The nurse repeated that again, and after gently patting Haruyuki's back, she got up.

"Since her condition is being monitored in detail, we'll come right away if something happens. You should rest a little too."

"Yes. Ah...umm, thank you very much."

As Haruyuki thanked the nurse who was departing and lowered his head—

As he looked at the video window displayed on the right side of his vision, he unexpectedly felt unease over a certain place within it. His intuition, polished by his enormous virtual game experience, was whispering that

there was something he should be seeing, something he should be thinking about.

What—What did I see just now?

Kuroyukihime's body was naked above the shoulders. But, she was still wearing something.

She was sunk in semi-transparent liquid, so he couldn't see it well, but—that black thing behind her neck was a Neuro Linker. And, directly connecting to it was a single thin cable. It extended outside the bed parallel to an oxygen tube, and connected to a large machine on the side.

"Pl...Please wait a moment."

Stopping quickly, the nurse tilted her head while looking back at him.

"What's wrong?"

"No, umm...Kuro, no, senpai's Neuro Linker, it's still equipped, isn't it?"

"Yes. Since we're monitoring her brain waves."

"Then, umm...that machine connected to it by cable isn't stand-alone...?"

"Of course, it's connected to the hospital's network."

—What!?

Seeing Haruyuki lose his breath, the nurse put on a quizzical expression and smiled as if to make him relieved.

"What's wrong, are you worried about the security? Don't worry, the medical-treatment level of the hospital's network has amazingly tough protective firewalls. There isn't a hacker that can do anything bad to that girl."

As he watched the back of the nurse, who was waving her hand with a "See you later then" and disappearing into the nurses' station, Haruyuki replied back in his mind as if groaning.

—Normally, that would be true. But, "that" isn't normal. "That", which can easily invade the social security camera network that should be equipped with the strongest firewalls in the country, and can steal real time images...

Only Brain Burst could.

Now alone in the hallway, Haruyuki sat down with a thud while holding the blanket in his left hand.

Kuroyukihime's Neuro Linker was completely severed from the Global Net. However, due to the direct connecting for the sake of treatment, she was connected to the hospital's network. —In other words.

Haruyuki murmured with a trembling voice.

"Burst Link."

Instantly, all sound and the world froze.

Standing up in his pig avatar form, Haruyuki clicked on the flaming B mark from among the icons lined up on the virtual desktop on his left with feelings of praying.

The Brain Burst console activated and the matching list opened.

Following the Searching indicator, the name «Silver Crow» appeared at the top of the list.

And, placed just a little below it was—the name «Black Lotus».

“No...No way...”

Haruyuki groaned.

If he operated his Neuro Linker and disconnected from the hospital’s network, he could disappear from the matching list. But, Kuroyukihime, whose brain waves were being monitored, couldn’t do that.

Of course, they weren’t connected to the Global Net, so people couldn’t limitlessly intrude from the outside. But, if there was a Burst Linker in this hospital—and if they activated Brain Burst, saw «Black Lotus» and challenged her to a duel—

The unconscious Kuroyukihime would without a doubt be hunted.

No, it couldn’t be so convenient, there was no reason for a Burst Linker to be in the same hospital. At this hour, there shouldn’t be anyone going in and out of the hospital anymore, and if there were a Burst Linker besides

Haruyuki and Kuroyukihime currently connected to the hospital's network, their name would also have to appear on the matching list.

So there's no need to be impatient.

Haruyuki tried to tell himself that. However, the sweaty feeling running over his avatar's round hands didn't go away at all.

No—not yet. I'm still overlooking something.

What if...there was a Burst Linker who was in a position to know that «Black Lotus», Accel World's largest bounty, had sustained serious injuries and was hospitalized, and would even know which hospital she was in?

After trying to keep thinking that "There couldn't be such a person", Haruyuki opened his eyes wide along with a profound shudder.

There was. There was just one such enemy. «Cyan Pile».

A mysterious enemy whose true identity could only be traced through the virus they had put in Chiyuri's Neuro Linker. At this point, it could only be said that they were someone at Umesato Middle School.

And Kuroyukihime's accident had already been notified to the school. When the cause was Araya driving and plunging a car without a license into her immediately after being bailed, this was already big news. By now, this topic would without a doubt be coursing through the gossip network of the Umesato Middle School students.

The hospital she was staying at wouldn't be specified yet. If her admirers from among the lower-year female students or her fan club members knew about her hospital destination, they would be rushing through here in throngs by now.

But—the teachers would already know. Like that, it was just a matter of time before it spread among the students. If well-wishing students were to appear in great numbers and «Cyan Pile» was mixed in among them, picking him out would be difficult.

It was...inevitable.

Haruyuki dropped his shoulders crestfallenly, and sat next to his blue frozen real self.

Kuroyukihime was fighting for her life right now. Considering that, it was a fact that she wouldn't be able to fight in «duel» yet.

Fortunately, challenging the same opponent to a duel was limited to once a day. Until Kuroyukihime's condition recovered, it would be alright if she was defeated once or twice and lost some points—

No—idiot me!! What did Kuroyukihime say back then!?

Haruyuki clenched both his fists, and stood up with a rush.

The final command she used to save Haruyuki, «Physical Full Burst».



The compensation for using that transcendental effect, which accelerated not just one's consciousness but also the physical body, was the loss of 99% of one's Burst Points.

Most likely, if the current Kuroyukihime, whose Burst Points were on the verge of annihilation, were to lose even once against the lower-level «Cyan Pile», her Burst Points would become zero all too quickly.

And at that instant, Kuroyukihime's Brain Burst would be forcibly uninstalled.

To that person...to Kuroyukihime, who kept fighting just to struggle to reach the goal of Level 10, that was nearly synonymous with death.

I can't allow that to happen, I absolutely won't let just that happen. I can't allow «Cyan Pile» to battle Kuroyukihime even once.

Kuroyukihime risked her life to protect me.

That's why this time, I'll protect it. That person's other half.

From this moment on, I'll watch the hospital's entrance without a wink of sleep. With the resolution to consume all my points if I have to, I'll accelerate every time an Umesato student appears, find «Cyan Pile» and challenge him.

And then—I'll beat him. I'll beat that guy who's on the verge of exhausting his points and banish him from Accel World eternally.

"I'll protect you. I'll definitely protect you."

In the blue world where there was only himself, Haruyuki spoke out.

"Because...I...I have something I have to say to you. When we meet again. That's why, this time, I'll fight."

Turning his eyes towards the direction of Kuroyukihime, who should have lied on the other side of the blue wall in front of him, Haruyuki declared that firmly.

Returning to reality by giving the Burst Out command, Haruyuki hugged his knees and sat down sideways the bench, wrapped the blanket around his body and stared fixedly on the entrance to the left inside the hallway.

There were other entrances within the hospital, but one had to authenticate their Neuro Linker at this entrance in order to connect to the hospital's network. So «Cyan Pile» should definitely appear there.

The time was half-past ten at night.

The chances of them appearing at this hour, when visiting hours had already passed, was low, but the enemy was also cornered right now. If they aimed at Kuroyukihime while she was in an unconscious state, they could certainly start attacking as soon as they learned the name of the hospital.

Haruyuki operated his Neuro Linker and set the awakening alarm at the highest volume. With this, if he was close to falling asleep, it would ring at a practically deadly level of noise and wake him up.

This was the first time in Haruyuki's life that he stayed up to such a late hour at night.

However, he never found himself bored, let alone sleepy. Haruyuki kept turning his wide-open eyes to the dim light of the entrance most of the time, and occasionally glanced at the miniaturized video window of the ER.

The white form of Kuroyukihime lying in the capsule bed didn't even twitch, but Haruyuki distinctly felt that she was going through a desperate battle there.

Do your best. Do your best.

Every time Haruyuki looked at the video, he prayed that inside his heart. He and that person were connected through their respective Neuro Linkers, the hospital's network and also the Brain Burst program. That's why his prayer should surely be answered. Haruyuki unquestionably believed that.

Around 2 AM, the worried-face nurse came with a paper cup of coffee to see how he was doing. Declining milk and sugar, the taste of the black coffee he drank for the first time in his life was so bitter that it stung his tongue.

At 5 AM, the first light of dawn shined through the entrance slightly. After hesitating briefly, Haruyuki dashed to the toilet and then returned full circle to the bench after coming out in the shortest time in his life.

6 AM. As the staff who came and went on this floor increased here and there, Haruyuki strengthened his vigilance even more.

7 AM. The night duty staff that had finished their work were going home one after another. That nurse handed another cup of coffee and a sandwich, and then left as well while leaving warm words to him.

8:30 AM—

After the late night staff at the reception desk had been changed, the automatic door of the hospital's front entrance opened.

As if they had been waiting for that, several people, mainly elderly patients, came through the entrance.

Feeling more alerted than before, Haruyuki opened both his eyes fully and stared fixedly at the flow of patients.

Even if one said that already half a year had passed since he entered school and that it was a small-scale school with only three classes per grade, he couldn't remember the faces of all the students at Umesato as expected. When he saw the faces of young people he was uncertain of, he didn't hesitate to accelerate and check the matching list.

As he continuously strained his concentration, the digit of the digital time indicator in the corner of Haruyuki's vision slowly, slowly changed, seeming to laugh at him.

Thirty-five minutes. Forty minutes.

Kuroyukihime hadn't gotten out of her serious condition yet. Of the twelve hours the doctor had told him, more than ten hours had already passed.

Please regain consciousness quickly. And release the cerebral monitor.

Haruyuki desperately prayed.

Once more—once more, I want to meet that person in the accelerated world for just the two of us.

And I'll say it this time. My feelings. I'll speak honestly from the bottom of my heart.

8:45 AM.

At last, Haruyuki saw a face that was familiar before his eyes for the first time since he became vigilant.

For an instant, his breath was caught—and then, he let it back out without a long sigh of relief.

That face wasn't just familiar. It was one of the two faces he had seen for the longest time in this world.

That tall and slender figure with good posture was wrapped in mature velour's jacket and chino-pants. His hair, which had an airy feeling, shined a transparent brown in the morning light.

So he came...

Haruyuki removed the tension from his shoulders and smiled a little.

“Hey, Taku! Over here!”

As Haruyuki overly loud shout passed through the hospital from the hallway to the entrance, Takumu—Mayuzumi Takumu suddenly stopped his right leg while stepping forward.

It seemed that he hadn’t noticed Haruyuki yet. His eyes turned left and right from the furthest inside the entrance, and then finally turned straight towards the hallway that was connected to the emergency room.

He made eye contact with Haruyuki who had gotten off the bench and waving his hand, and then—

Takumu inclined his head a little, and blinked intensely several time.

And then, he gave his usual bright and cheerful smile.

After quickly raising the right arm of his navy-blue jacket, he tapped his blue Neuro Linker with his finger.

‘Wait until I’ve been authenticated by the hospital’s network’, is what Haruyuki immediately guessed from that. At the same time, he smiled, thinking ‘What a methodical guy as usual’.

Regardless of whether the goal of visiting the hospital was for a check-up or to visit a patient, it was a national regulation in all hospitals that one must sign in their Neuro Linker to the hospital’s network while walking through the entrance, and then show one’s ID at the reception desk and get a name tag.

However, one has to stand and wait at the entrance for only thirty seconds until the strict authentication is finished, so there's not much difference if one saves time by moving while it does so. Actually, when Haruyuki came here last night, he didn't stop running even for a moment until he reached the front of the ER, so the authentication had ended after Kuroyukihime had disappeared to the other side of the door.

But it seemed that Takumu didn't intend to commit even that kind of trivial violation of regulations. Even while looking at Haruyuki with a frustrated face, he stood in the middle of the entrance and waited for the sign-in completion.

Then, as if he suddenly noticed something, Takumu turned his body to the side.

His eyes turned to the direction of the automatic door, and he put his left hand over his mouth as if he were calling out to someone in a loud voice.

As Haruyuki thought 'Did Chiyuri also come?', he also tried to look through to the other side of the front entrance.

Just before his gaze left Takumu. A faint uneasiness came upon him.

Takumu, who had good conduct unlike Haruyuki, was shouting inside a hospital?

Rather using his hand in place of a megaphone, it was as if—his mouth. And the words he was issuing from there.

To Haruyuki, it seemed like he was trying to hide them.

At that instant, the uneasiness changed into a shudder. A needle of ice pierced straight through Haruyuki's spine.

Even as his eyes widened and he stood upright, several thoughts flashed through his mind at the same time.

I—Why did I conclude that that guy, that «Cyan Pile», was a student at Umesato Middle School?

Of course, because he put that virus in Chiyuri's Neuro Linker. Because he was using Chiyuri as a stepping stone, and attacking Kuroyukihime like a ghost from somewhere within the school's local network.

But. What if he made that Backdoor for the sake of accessing it from the Global Net? In that case, the suspects wouldn't be limited to within Umesato Middle School, but extend across the entire country.

However, at the same time, a new filter to narrow the suspects down appeared.

Why Chiyuri? Of course, because she was within easy contact for him.

Someone outside the school, who is the closest to Chiyuri. Someone so close to her side, that he could direct connect to Chiyuri's Neuro Linker. There was only one person who fit these conditions. Someone who, right this instant, was standing just twenty meters in front of him—

The instant his thoughts reach that point, Haruyuki's mouth moved automatically and sent the command.



“Burst Link!!”

—The boy who was both Chiyuri’s childhood friend and boyfriend.

Takumu.

Bashiiiiiiii!!

A cold and dry froze the world.

Ahead of him, Takumu, with his left hand in front of his mouth, hardened into blue.

But, that wasn’t true. Within that palm, Takumu was also reciting the command at the same time. And his consciousness was being accelerated in a different frozen space from Haruyuki.

You? It was you? No way. Impossible. Why. Why?

Even while he made incoherent shouts in his mind, the right hand of Haruyuki’s avatar flashed to the top of the virtual desktop at the highest possible speed.

Right at this instant, Takumu should also be doing the same thing. Activating the Brain Burst console, and waiting for the update of the matching list. And then, like touching a dropped fruit, he would click on the name «Black Lotus» and challenge her to a duel.

Before that happened, Haruyuki had to challenge «Cyan Pile».

Haruyuki clenched his teeth, opened his eyes wide, and stare at the searching indicator of the matching list.

With a ping, there was his own name at the top. «Silver Crow».

Next, the beloved person he had to protect. «Black Lotus».

And then last, the name of the enemy he had to defeat finally appeared as a real string of characters for the first time before Haruyuki's eyes.

«Cyan Pile».

Be in time————!!

While sending out that scream with all his body and soul, Haruyuki clicked the name at super-speed and hit the duel command from the window with a pop.

## Chapter 8

BAKIBAKIBAKIBAKI!!

What rang through the world in that moment was a strange tremor, like countless metal clumps grating against each other.

The fresh morning sunlight flowing in from the front entrance degenerated into a creepy yellow.

The surrounding floor and walls were covered with biological-looking slime everywhere from Haruyuki's feet, and with creased and rusted metal. The support pillars had joints like the abdomen of an insect and were twisted, and there were many strange eye-like bulges visible on the ceiling.

It had only taken a few seconds for the interior of the cutting-edge hospital that had been so clean to be covered with organic metal-like pollution like something from the nightmare of a classic cyberpunk author.

As he held his breath and stood stock still, Haruyuki's body began to be covered by shining silver armor from the tips of his limbs and at the same time was squeezed and thinned down like a wire.

Everything from his lower back to his abdomen and chest also changed into smooth silver, and at the end his head was wrapped in a round helmet.

At nearly the same time as Haruyuki transformed from the pink avatar to the duel avatar «Silver Crow», two physical strength gauges extended out in the upper corner of his vision with a screeching sound.

In between the gauges were the numeral digits of 1800.

And then finally, a flame burst out with a roar in the middle. The characters of «FIGHT!!» that appeared inside that shined a deep red, and then scattered with an explosion.

After quickly looking at the countdown that had started to decrease and letting out a breath of relief as he thought 'I made it in time', Haruyuki looked towards the end of the slimy hallway, where Takumu had been standing.

Standing there while facing towards the side in the exact same place was a duel avatar with an unexpected form.

That...was Takumu!? «Cyan Pile»!?

Haruyuki unconsciously moved back half a step with his right leg in astonishment.

He was gigantic, no, his height wasn't that big. He was only about five centimeters taller than Takumu, who was one-hundred-and-seventy-five centimeters in his first year of middle school—but even so, Silver Crow, who was at most one-hundred-and-fifty-five, had to raise his eyes to look up at him.

However, more overwhelming than that was how incredibly thick Cyan Pile's entire body was.

It was different from being fat. Limbs and torso with rugged muscles bulging on them like a pro-wrestler's. And that was all wrapped in metallic-blue snug bodysuit-type armor.

Dark blue rough boots on the feet, and a similarly colored giant glove on the left hand.

He looked like a macho hero from some American comic book. This image was a full 160 degree reverse from the actual slender and slim Takumu.

While Haruyuki was inescapably overwhelmed and stood stock still.

Turning his body to the left slowly, Cyan Pile's gaze poured straight forward at him.

Cyan Pile's head was covered by a stylish tear drop-shaped mask. Several long and narrow slit-like gaps were opened horizontally on the face, with points facing downward vertically at the center of each slit. Looking at it, it reminded one of a kendo mask.

Inside one of the slits, two bluish-white eyes suddenly flashed and shined sharply. He slowly lifted his left leg and stomped the floor heavily. The piled up slime there went flying left and right with a splash.

While he took another step with his left leg, Haruyuki's eyes were drawn in by Cyan Pile's exposed right arm. What—was that!?



There was no arm-like glove on his right arm. It was connected to a pipe from the elbow onwards.

The pipe had a diameter of fifteen centimeters and a length of one meter. Furthermore, the sharp tip of a rod, which stuck out from an aperture on it and seemed to be installed in the pipe, was emitting a glaring and dangerous radiance.

Cyan Pile's attribute, based on the color of the armor that wrapped around his entire body, was «Close Range Blue». Moreover, according to Kuroyukihime, this was exceedingly close to the pure color of blue. So, that sharp rod shouldn't be a projectile weapon.

But even as Haruyuki thought that, he couldn't help moving back another step.

As if he was tormenting the stock-still slender Silver Crow, Cyan Pile took one slow step, then another down the organic metal hallway. Then, his movements suddenly stopped.

That mask with parallel slits turned to look at the surroundings.

The voice that flowed out from inside that was—darkly warped, but that was certainly the refreshing voice that he had heard for so long, of his best friend Takumu.

"Hmm, so this is the «Purgatory» stage. It's been a while since I've seen it. What were its attributes again?"

In the face of that carefree chatting, Haruyuki unconsciously opened his mouth.

"Ta...Taku..."

SUGYAAAAAH!!

Suddenly swinging it, the steel rod of Cyan Pile's right arm ate into the metal wall of the hallway, and unseemly tore it up. Scattered metal scraps, slime and crushed unknown bugs fell and dripped down onto the floor.

Haruyuki gulped back down his words and cringed in fear with a 'HIKUN!'.

Fleetingly looking at his reaction, Cyan Pile continued speaking further in a cheerful voice.

"As expected, it's hard. Destroying this stage may be a little difficult."

Thud. He resumed walking, and his big blue frame approached before Haruyuki's eyes as if leaning over him.

"Haru...Haru. As usual, the way you operate a virtual desktop is so fast. Though all I had left to do was pull the Duel button, you broke in just before that."

"Ta...kumu..."

—So it really is you. Why? Since when?

Since when on earth have you been a Burst Linker?



Before Haruyuki could give voice to the questions swirling in his chest, Cyan Pile uttered more words.

"To think you would become a Burst Linker...I'm shocked. Yesterday, I couldn't keep myself completely calm as expected. I never thought that my best friend would betray me like that, right, Haru?"

"Ta...kumu...N...No, that's not it. That was..."

The words that Haruyuki blurted out in a hoarse voice were drowned out by the loud sound of the steel rod hitting against the wall again.

"...How was it, Haru? How did it feel to direct connect on Chii-chan's bed? How did it feel to hug her? How did Chii-chan's body feel as you touched her while thinking about me?"

—That isn't Takumu. Haruyuki cried that out without saying it.

That isn't the Taku I know. Taku wouldn't say such things. Always bright and refreshing, never showing any negative feelings at all, that is Takumu.

Cyan Pile was someone else. Surely, he's put a Backdoor in Takumu's Neuro Linker as well and is connecting from somewhere far away.

Haruyuki desperately tried to tell himself that.

But, at the same time, the presence that he had felt back then.

Haruyuki was strongly aware that the presence he had felt when he had direct connected with Chiyuri and discovered the virus in her Neuro Linker, of someone lurking deep inside there, watching and listening

intently, was exactly the same as the presence he felt densely rising up from the blue duel avatar in front of him.

And, possibly, it might have been the same as the fleeting glances that Takumu had given towards the playing Haruyuki and Chiyuri since long ago, from the time that the three of them had been small children.

"Taku...It was you."

The words that Haruyuki emitted from beneath his silver helmet resounded so sharply and strongly that it surprised even himself.

"It was you that put that virus in Chiyu's Neuro Linker. You secretly connected to Chiyu, and peeked through her memory, sight and hearing as you pleased!"

"Please don't call it a virus."

Stopping just five meters away from Haruyuki, the huge avatar lightly spread out his left hand in a stylish manner that was the only thing like Takumu.

"Chii-chan is my girlfriend. So it's only natural that we direct connect. And direct connecting is the same thing as presenting your Neuro Linker to your partner. Things like circumventing password authentication, exposing the deepest parts of one's local memory, looking at any file and installing any kind of program, it's all acceptable. Am I wrong? Haru, even you ..."

Haruyuki felt that, inside the thin slits cut across Cyan Pile's mask, there was a warped smile on the face that he couldn't see.

"Even you direct connected with Chii-chan, and secretly looked through her memory, didn't you? What's more, you're not even her boyfriend either. The one who took advantage of Chii-chan's kindness and pretended to be pitiful was you, wasn't it?"

"Th...That's..."

"You've always been like that since long ago, Haru."

As Cyan Pile began to speak in a calm voice, a big metallic bug with a weird shape tried to pass by on the wall to the right of him.

Cyan Pile lifted the giant needle of his right arm with a casual gesture, and lightly pierced the back of the bug with it. Stopped on the wall and making squeaking noises, the bug furiously waved its countless legs as it tried to escape.

"Always, always since long ago, you kept saying to Chii-chan, 'Aren't I pitiful? Aren't I pathetic? That's why, be kind to me. Care for me more.' Even if you didn't use words, in your behaviour, in your eyes...No, it could be seen in your existence itself."

Making a wet squishy noise, the needle sank further into the shell of the bug. Grew fluid scattered around, and the virtual bug began to wriggle and struggle even more.

"Girls sure are incomprehensible. Compared to when she holds hands with me, Chii-chan seems to be enjoying herself more when she's pulling your hand while grumbling and complaining. She always looks so much happier by looking after you and meddling in your business, since long ago...Did you know? Whenever she goes anywhere, she always carries a huge toweling handkerchief. For the sweaty you."

BACHA!!

And with a horrifying noise, the bug was crushed, and its dark green shell and legs scattered about along with slime.

As the bug's fluids dripped from the needle, the half-dumbfounded Haruyuki asked Cyan Pile.

"That's why...? That's why you confessed to Chiyu two years ago? Looking like you were impatient...?"

"It wasn't 'like', I was impatient. If things were left as they were, Chii-chan would have tried to keep looking after you for the rest of her life, you know? Like one of those old-fashioned manga that you have archived. 'Since you're no good without me around, I'll marry you.' —Ah, could it have been your plan to induce Chii-chan into that as well?"

'Hahahaha', Cyan Pile gave a seemingly pleasant laugh, but which contained a distorted echo that made one shudder.

No. That's not it—

Takumu, you're wrong. Chiyuri definitely didn't enjoy looking after the pitiful me. She was seriously worried and suffered.

But, Haruyuki didn't know how to express those thoughts in words to Takumu. Because when looking at everything from the surface, what Takumu said was true to some extent.

Cyan Pile's foot took another step towards the stock-still Haruyuki.

"When Chii-chan chose me two years ago, I was so happy. I thought that Chii-chan also finally understood. That it was much better to be happy at my side, than going through hardships by looking after Haru. That...was the pragmatic decision after all."

"Pragma...tic?"

"'We can't stay children forever', right?"

Those were the words that Haruyuki had told Chiyuri yesterday. Cyan Pile lifted the tip of his green-dyed metallic needle in the air as if asking for agreement.

"Even Chii-chan is a girl...no, a woman. She eventually realized that having a boyfriend you can boast about to your friends, a happy marriage, and a satisfying life is what true «happiness» is. That's why I also worked hard. I studied desperately to enter my current school, and trained my body by running every day. While you were playing worthless games and spent time fast asleep, Haru."

"You...do you seriously mean that?"

Still unable to gather his thoughts, Haruyuki cried that out almost reflexively.

"Do you seriously believe that Chiyu chose you over some calculation like that!?"

"I don't like how you call it 'calculating'. It's looking at everything from an impartial point of view."

'Fufufu', Cyan Pile laughed once again.

"Chii-chan has the right to be happy. The right to go out with me, who has the first place results among the first years at school and is the municipal tournament champion in kendo."

"....."

Haruyuki sharply drew in a breath, and took in even more.

As I thought, this isn't Takumu.

I don't believe, I don't want to believe at all that this is Takumu's true nature. Something has warped him.

Certainly, Haruyuki and Chiyuri were also partly to blame for it. While going out with Takumu, Chiyuri putting feelings towards Haruyuki. That was also part of what drove Takumu into a wall.

But—what changed Takumu far more greatly than that was, most likely.

"...You're wrong, Taku."

Haruyuki lifted up his silver mask and stared straight at the sharp eyes of Cyan Pile.

"The first place position, the championship, those aren't your power. That's Brain Burst's...«accelerations»'s power. Since when? Since when did you become a Burst Linker?"

For a short while, silence filled the Purgatory stage.

A group of small bugs passed by their feet, and steam like that of a living being's sometimes rose from the creases that opened up along the wall.

Since it had started from 1800, the countdown had already passed through 200 seconds. At the same time as the hundred-digit column became '5', Cyan Pile spoke out.

"It's my power."

He pointed his right arm's needle straight at Haruyuki.

"«Acceleration» is my power. My power, from fostering my aptitude by immersing myself in intellectual training software in my Neuro Linker to the point of hating it ever since I was an infant! It's only been a year since I became a Burst Linker. The captain of my kendo club is my «Parent»...and a close-aide of the «Blue King». He had great expectations of me. I became a cadet for the elite guards. But..."

GAGYAAAAAN!!

He greatly swung his right arm and engraved several scars into the wall.

"It's too late!! You've only recently become a Burst Linker, haven't you!? And you think you've become my equal with just that, Haru!? Since you have confidence in your «acceleration» power, you think you can get back Chii-chan again!? It's no good, Haru. You can't win against me. Whether it be in studying, sports, Chii-chan's feelings...and of course, even in this Accel World. I'll make you understand. Understand my power...against that weak duel avatar of yours."

SHINE!! Both of Cyan Pile's eyes emitted a dreadful light.

He's serious. Takumu seriously intends to fight.

Inside Haruyuki, there were still feelings like, 'If I exhaust all my words, he'll understand. I want to explain Chiyuri's and also my true feelings. I don't want to fight like this.'

But, if Haruyuki lost here.

Cyan Pile would duel with Black Lotus again. And would hunt while she's unconscious. At that instant, Kuroyukihime would lose all her points, and also lose her acceleration ability at the same time.

Just that. Whatever else happened, he had to prevent just that.

"...Taku. You certainly are amazing. You can study, play sports, and are so cool. You have all the things that I don't have."

Looking down, Haruyuki murmured in a subdued voice.



But, immediately after, he stared straight at Cyan Pile and shouted sharply.

"But, you're an idiot. You're a great big idiot!"

"...What? I'm an idiot?"

"That's right, because you can't win against me! Have you forgotten? Since long ago, in just how many games were you able to win against me?"

"...Haru. Haru."

There was a laugh mixed in there, but it was a fierce-sounding voice.

"Then, right here and now...I'll make you lose the last of your pride!!"

BANG!! Cyan Pile's boots kicked off from the floor.

With that, he shortened the two-meter distance between them with an amazing speed that didn't suit his huge body.

But, as expected, compared to the charge of Ash Roller's bike, it was slow.

I'll slip past him. And then move to somewhere more spacious. The entrance hall...no, the rooftop.

Haruyuki concentrated his focus on Cyan Pile's right hand. The opponent was a close-combat type, so as long as he didn't enter the range of that needle, he wouldn't receive damage.

After seeing Cyan Pile's movements as he drew back his right arm in preparation, Haruyuki also dashed in order to escape to the opposite side of him.

Silver Crow's speed, which nearly his only redeeming feature, seemed to be unexpected for the opponent as well. With a hint of a little surprise, the right arm drew an arc and stuck out towards Haruyuki.

—I can dodge it!!

While predicting the attack trajectory, Haruyuki lowered his posture and tried to cut across right next to Cyan Pile's left leg.

GASHUN!!

At that moment, an unexpected sound rang out.

In the corner of Haruyuki's wide-open sight, flames spouted out from the tail end of the thick pipe attached to Cyan Pile's right arm.

From the pointed end at the front, a shining and thick steel needle shot out at a speed he couldn't follow.

It seemed to be a device that extended out double its original length instead of a firearms-type weapon, but that range was enough to catch Silver Crow.

CLANG!! Haruyuki heard an unpleasant breaking noise go through his body.

At the same time, an impact. And a numb-like dull pain.

Haruyuki saw the tip of the steel needle cut pierce through and cut off his arm from the left elbow.

Haruyuki belatedly remembered that «pile» meant «stake».

Falling on the floor while emitting sparks from its end, his arm immediately smashed into thousands of small fragments and vanished.

His health gauge in the left corner of his vision also suddenly decreased by almost 30% from that single attack.

But, Haruyuki didn't have the time to regret receiving such great damage so quickly right at the start. While his posture was destroyed and he endured having his back noisily strike the hallway's wall and falling down, Haruyuki saw the still-extended brutal steel needle—no, steel stake be stored back into Cyan Pile's right arm.

It was clear that, the instant the stake was reloaded in the launcher tube, it would fire that terrible attack again.

Its attack attribute was most likely «piercing».

The metal-color Silver Crow should have resistance against that. For it to have torn apart his arm with a single blow despite that, was it because the place that was hit was bad, or because there was a difference of three levels between them, or was it more simply Cyan Pile's strength?

Even as he instantly considered those things, Haruyuki readjusted his posture and created distance between them by jumping far.

Like that, he dashed in the direction of the entrance hall at full power without looking back.

"Hahaha! What, are you going to suddenly run away, Haru!!"

Plunging into the hall as if urged forward by that warped laughter which sounded behind him, Haruyuki quickly ran his gaze over the surroundings.

The long benches that were lined up in the waiting space had changed into cast iron with thorns poking out of them like some medieval torture device, and the reception counter to the right had rusted barbed wire twined around it. Naturally, there were no signs of people.

And behind the counter was the thing he was looking for. Elevator doors.

In the «End of the Century» stage, you couldn't enter inside the buildings and so naturally the elevators wouldn't function either, but if it was the «Purgatory» stage where the indoor was reconstructed in such detail, it may function.

Rushing over to it, Haruyuki hit the skull-shaped button next to the door, which had turned into ferocious-looking iron grill bars, while praying. Sure enough, with a grave metallic thud and clang, the iron grill opened up left and right. He clutched his right hand while thinking 'Alright!'.

From behind him, the thudding footsteps of Cyan Pile approached moment by moment.

Plunging into the prison cell-like elevator box, he slammed his right hand into the button engraved with an 'R'. Quickly, move quickly.

Just as the iron grill closed with a frustratingly slow speed, something hit the door with a loud clang. Sticking through the space of about five centimeters between the grills was a shining sharp tip.

"...!!"

Stopping himself from nearly letting out a scream, Haruyuki sprang back at once and pressed his back against the wall.

GASHUN!!

The steel stake, which was launched while pushing and bending the grill a little, stopped just barely a few centimeters in front of Silver Crow's thin abdomen.

At the same time as that brutal radiance was pulled back out, the box finally shook with a clattering and the elevator began to rise.

"Hahaha! Hahahahaha!!"

As that howling laughter continued to stick close from below his feet, Haruyuki stamped his right foot down hard and tore it away.

Getting out on the rooftop, Haruyuki turned his gaze around while taking a rough breath.

"....."

His eyes widened unconsciously.

The sky of the «Purgatory» stage was filled with a creepy yellow light, and darkish clouds were swelling up there like living creatures. The surrounding streets, which should have originally been at the center of the Sugunami area, had uniformly changed into a strange living creature-like form, and shined in a slimy dark-red rusty color.

The group of lance-like spires that could be seen over that way seemed to be the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Office in Shinjuku and the skyscrapers that surrounded it.

Just how far did this stage spread? As Haruyuki thought that, he suddenly noticed something and held his breath.

There were people.

No, those silhouettes were too strange to be called human. Lined up in small groups on the surrounding buildings that were taller than the hospital, they looked down at Haruyuki. They were unknown Burst Linkers—spectators.

Why!? After a moment of astonishment, Haruyuki finally realized.

Haruyuki was currently cut off from the Global Net, but the other person in this duel, Takumu, was probably globally connected just before the match had started. The reason why he would go so far as to risk the danger letting others intrude was unknown, but in any case this stage was opened to the outside and Burst Linkers who had registered Cyan Pile and Silver Crow in their automatic gallery had appeared as a result.

However, even if there was a gallery, there was no great difference to the situation.

The light blue arrow cursor that was visible in his vision began to change direction slowly as it slightly trembled, indicating that Cyan Pile had also gotten on the elevator and was heading towards the roof.

After moving about ten meters across the vast roof, Haruyuki turned around to face the elevator door. In this place, there was plenty of space to dodge and evade unlike the hallway.

I've already grasped the range of Cyan Pile's steel stake with my body. If I'm careful and pay attention to the direction of his right, it should be possible to dodge it. Don't be afraid. I have to do it.

As Haruyuki told himself that, the elevator stopped with a clang ahead of him, and the door slowly opened left and right.

As his huge figure rubbed against the box that fully enclosed him, Cyan Pile stepped out onto the roof, and the eyes within his slits glowed weakly.

"...I see. If it's here, you'll be able to use the strategy of hit-and-run by darting about, Haru...no, Silver Crow."

"And your body build must have been getting hot down there."

"Ahaha, to think you of all people would say such a thing."

While letting out deep-throated laugh, Cyan Pile slowly began to move forward.

Haruyuki lowered his posture and measured the distance between them.

He shouldn't have been able to see through Silver Crow's speed yet. A chance to win lay only there. Before his eyes can get accustomed to it, seize victory no matter what.

Just before his heavy-looking boot took its fourth step and connected with the ground, Haruyuki kicked off the ground with all his strength.

The air rang in his ears with a swishing sound, and he instantly got close to that huge blue figure.

Cyan Pile's right arm followed the straight-rushing Haruyuki while aiming.

—Here!!

Haruyuki unexpectedly took off from his left leg, and swung his course to the right. The steel stake then shot out at ultra-high speed along with a yell. It was nearly impossible to react after seeing it launch, but if you anticipate its collision path beforehand—it's possible!

The tip of the steel stake stopped just short of Haruyuki's left cheek as he drew an arc and circled around to Cyan Pile's left side. While feeling heat on his cheek as if it burned, Haruyuki kicked off the ground with his right leg using all his strength, and—

"U...raaah!!"



Haruyuki's right fist drive into Cyan Pile's virtually open flank. A strong reaction. The huge blue body shook.

More—Keep going!!

Running after Cyan Pile's back as his body spun and turned around, Haruyuki dashed forward with another step and this time lodged a right spin-kick into the enemy's left calf. As Cyan Pile lost his balance, Haruyuki sent a final left knee-kick to the middle of his back.

BANG!! A heavy impact. His huge figure bent forward in a ' < ' shape.

Staggeringly making some distance between them, Cyan Pile groaned hatefully.

"Guh...as...as expected, you really are good at games, Haru. But, such weak attacks have no effect... at all!!"

WHOOSH, just barely avoiding the left fist that was swung at him, Haruyuki rolled his body with that momentum and buried his right heel into the back of Cyan Pile's defenseless protruding neck.

"Gguuuuuh!!"

Blocking his ears to the crushing scream from Takumu's voice, Haruyuki continued his rush further.

He unleashed a combo without pause using not only both his legs and right arm, but even his torn-up left arm too.

Before he knew it, scream-like shouts also started coming out from his own mouth as well.

"You... idiot!! You great big idiot!! Chiyu!! Chiyu didn't want for you to be first place among the first years, the metropolitan tournament champion, or anything like that!!"

Jumping high using a front kick he desperately fired as a kick-off point, Haruyuki grabbed Cyan Pile's mask and hit his own silver helmet against it with all his strength.

CRACK, with a breaking sound, part of the blue mask broke and fell.

As Cyan Pile lost his balance and fell to the ground on his back, Haruyuki sat on top of his chest and kept repeatedly hitting with his right fist.

"Chiyu only wished for you to stay as you were!! The one making her see only the past, who is making her think 'I want to return to the old days', is you, Takumu!! The only one that changed among us is you!!"

Without thinking of anything, he cried out those words in a violent fury.

But, just as Haruyuki's voice resounded, both of Cyan Pile's eyes let out a shudderingly cold and strong light beneath his fissure-like slits.

"Don't...get..."

Suddenly, both of Cyan Pile's thick arms crossed together with a jerk as if protecting himself.

But, Haruyuki didn't immediately realize that this wasn't a defensive movement.

"Don't get cockyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!!"

At the same time as he fully expanded his two arms to the left and right, the sharp tips of over ten stakes rose to the surface of Cyan Pile's bodysuit from chest to belly with a 'HOGOGOGOGO' noise.

What!? This is bad—Dodge—

But, the instant that Haruyuki tried to kick off the ground with both legs and jump away.

"—«Splash Stingeeeeeeeeer»!!"

ZUDODODODODO!!

Along with a rapid-fire sound like a heavy machine gun, the many stakes were shot straight at Haruyuki from close range.

"Kkuooo!!"

He somehow managed to avoid the stakes flying towards his head and the middle of his chest. However, immediately after, Haruyuki received dreadful impact to his left shoulder, left flank and right knee, and was blown high up like scrapped garbage and then fell back down to the floor of the rooftop on his back.

"Guh...hah...!!"

A gasp mixed with a shout was squeezed out from his throat. His vision flickered, and a dull and heavy pain coursed through his whole body. He couldn't believe that this was virtual damage being transmitted from his Neuro Linker.

What on earth—was that just now!?

As Haruyuki supported himself on his right arm and somehow lifted up his upper body, Cyan Pile sluggishly stood up first in front of him.

"Ku...fu, fufufufufu."

As if some screws had come loose in him, laughter slowly leaked out from beneath Cyan Pile's blue mask.

"Kufufufu. You've...pushed me around quite vigorously, haven't you? I was just a little surprised. But...after all, you are an annoying little bug. It seems you even expressly built up my special technique gauge."

"Special...technique..."

While murmuring that, Haruyuki checked the gauges in the upper part of his vision once again.

Of the thick health gauges that extended left and right, Cyan Pile had 60% left. He had received damage beyond words during Haruyuki's rush. But Haruyuki's, due to directly receiving those blindly fired stakes just now, already had only about 30% left.

And, another light green gauge extended beneath each of their health gauges.

Cyan Pile's was shining clearly close to 70%. In comparison, Haruyuki's was nearly full to the tank.

"Hey, hey, don't tell me you're only hearing about it for the first time, Silver Crow."

While letting out 'Kukuku' laughter, Cyan Pile slowly began to move forward.

"The exchange of special techniques is the essence of «duels». The «Splash Stinger» just now was my Level 2 special technique. It's an ideal attack for shooting down noisy little bugs, right? Oh, speaking of which, your gauge should have also built up a lot. Please, by all means, use it as much as you like as well."

Haruyuki clenched his teeth hard.

The only special technique provided to Silver Crow, «Headbutt», couldn't hope to oppose Cyan Pile's technique that had a much long range than his. Furthermore, its motions were long and obvious, as though clearly saying that he was preparing to attack.

...Damn it, I don't need something like a special technique. I have my fist, feet and speed.

At the same time as his swaying vision settled down, Haruyuki threw all his strength into his right leg in order to quickly stand up.

But.

He heard a horrible cracking noise.

And a metallic clanking noise from his body falling back onto the ground.

As he confusedly looked down, what lay in front of him was a thin silver leg, which had been pierced by a stake shot and broke off from the knee—

"Aha, ahahahahaha!!"

Cyan Pile's piercing loud laughter.

"Your leg came off!! How fragile!! And yet you're a metal-color!?"

That voice didn't reach Haruyuki's consciousness.

Damn it. Damn it!!

Without my leg, I can't run anymore. Let alone dodging or dashing, even just moving is unreliable.

The creeping signs of panic quickly chilled the bottom of his body.

This is bad. I can't lose here. I have to protect senpai no matter what.

THUD.

A boot stepped down on Haruyuki's torn-off leg and shattered it like glass.

As Haru looked up, two bluish-white eyes narrowed quietly.

"...In the end, this is how you are, Haru."

A faint whispery voice.

"Being like that suits you. Though, you really said whatever you wanted to say earlier, didn't you? As if only you understand Chii-chan?"

"...I do, at the very least more than you."

"Then, what about me? Did you ever think about me? When me and Chii-chan are together just the two of us, she'd suddenly show a sorrowful face...When I know that it was because she was thinking about you, did you consider my feelings, Haru?"

Momentarily pausing his words and bringing his face closer, Cyan Pile—Takumu spoke the decisive words.

"Because you're like that."

It was a tone that even seemed to be gentle in some way, but those words pierced Haruyuki's chest far more deeply than the giant steel stake.

"Because you're like that, me and Chii-chan are held back by you, as if we've fallen into a muddled swamp and can't get back out. Just disappear already, Haru. And free me and Chii-chan."

THUD.

This time, he stepped down on Haruyuki's still-intact leg with the sole of his foot.

Emphatically raising his upper body and putting his right hand's launcher tube up high, Cyan Pile drew a complex trajectory with its tip. With that, everything from the launcher tube to his shoulder was wrapped in a vivid blue light.

Suddenly, the launcher made a deep noise and expanded to about three times its original thickness.

Sticking out from inside that was a tip that had become flattened, like a huge hammer.

The striking edge of the hammer was suddenly pointed at Haruyuki, who couldn't even consider moving anymore.

"Now then—Let's end it Haru. Everything."

This battle, and our pretend friendship. Cyan Pile's eyes said that.

Immediately after, the tip of the hammer emitted a dreadful light.

"—«Spiral Gravity Driver»!!"

GYUAAAA!!

As the hammer shot out while spinning and making mechanical sounds like countless gears turning, Haruyuki desperately tried to avoid it. But his leg was being steadily held by the foot, and he couldn't escape. Immediately after, Haruyuki was crushed by giant steel.



An instrumental duo with a high-pitch screech from his silver armor being smashed and a heavy bass from the floor beneath him being crushed.

Without being able to even cry out, Haruyuki was knocked through the floor and crashed into the hospital floor of next floor below.

But the hammer didn't stop there, further digging into both Haruyuki and the floor, and then—

BOGOH! BOGON! BOGOAH!!

While making continuous breaking noises, it finally stopped moving after going through all five floors of the hospital and embedding Haruyuki into the ground of the first floor.

CHIKA. CHIKA.

Something red flickered within the darkness in the upper left corner of his vision.

It took several seconds for Haruyuki to realize it was his health gauge, which had decreased to less than 10%.

As if regretting that it couldn't finish shaving off the gauge, the tip of Cyan Pile's hammer ate into Haruyuki's chest for a while, but soon enough it started spinning in the opposite direction and returned back up.

After the hammer left while rubble clattered down, what remained before Haruyuki's eyes was a small hole leading up to the distant rooftop. From inside that hole, Cyan Pile's voice resounded faintly.

"Ah, there's still a little left. Well, it's fine, there's only five or six minutes left anyway, the time will run out before I can go look for him and deliver the finishing blow. Besides, I still have to have to challenge the true «final boss» after this. —Now then!"

The tone of his voice changed. It sounded boastful—or somehow fawning.

"Did you see that, ladies and gentlemen within the gallery! And everyone from the Blue Legion in particular!! I'm still useful! I can fight properly even in the «Unlimited Field» above this! It's a waste to throw me away, just because I used up points a little too much, right!?"

Taku—Takumu...You...

While rolling over like a broken doll at the bottom of the hole, Haruyuki felt hot liquid go down his cheeks. It was tears. But, he didn't understand very well what he was crying over.

Probably, the tears were flowing because something precious had been broken and completely damaged without his noticing.

Even though it was a battle he couldn't lose. Even though he had to absolutely win, for Haruyuki's own sake, for Chiyuri's sake, for Takumu's sake—and for Kuroyukihime's sake.

While holding that pain of huge regret, Haruyuki slowly raised his body. Fragments of cracked armor spilled from his entire body like rain, and scattered onto the ground.

There was no meaning in standing up anymore. In order to accept this decisive defeat and return to his previous self before he knew about Brain Burst, Haruyuki held his knees where he lay and tried to wait just for the moment when the time count reached zero.

He began closing his eyes—just before he did that.

In the corner of the dimly-lit room.

That person's form emerged like an illusion.

There was a bed braided with thorns.

Encircled by countless jet-black petals in full bloom, a delicate form was laying down on it.

A dress blacker than darkness. Silver frills. A parasol placed beside her. And, spread-out beautiful black hair, and skin shining whiter than snow in the dim darkness. Her long eyelashes were quietly turned down.

Am I hallucinating?

While thinking that, Haruyuki dragged along his severed right leg and slowly, slowly approached the thorny bed. But, no matter how much he approached, there were no signs of Kuroyukihime's avatar vanishing.

After propping his right hand on the edge of the bed as if falling down on it, Haruyuki finally realized.

Here, this place is the micro-machine room of the ER, where Kuroyukihime is receiving medical treatment.

And Kuroyukihime was connected to the hospital's network. So, as soon as Haruyuki began an accelerated duel, automatic-spectator mode was activated and she was also invited to this stage.

"...Senpai."

While murmuring in a hoarse voice, Haruyuki extended his worn-out right hand and gently touched Kuroyukihime's cheek.

Words gushed out of him one after another as if a dam had broken. At the same time, his tears also returned.

"I...I couldn't protect you. I couldn't protect your dream, your wish. I couldn't respond to your expectations."

A tear, dripping from a crack of his half-broken helmet, fell down onto Kuroyukihime's cheek, and then scattered into a miniscule blaze and vanished.

"'I can change'...that's what I thought. I can change through your words, your kindness, and your feelings...But, it's useless. It's not my avatar's fault...probably, this avatar was created as the embodiment of my «resignation». The reasons that this, that Silver Crow was made like this is

because of me. I who, without looking at the sky and only facing the bottom, lives while groveling."

Haruyuki softly turned over his body, and clung to the tip of Kuroyukihime's shoulder.

"I wanted to go there. To the place where you were...To that distant and high sky, where you easily flapped your wing. Higher...faster...escaping this bog-like reality...together with you..."

With a sob, Haruyuki squeezed out the last words.

"I wanted, to fly."

—TOKUN.

At that time, as if responding to his voice, a faint sound was heard.

TOKUN. TOKUN.

The source of the sound was Kuroyukihime's chest, which Haruyuki's cheek was lying on top of. A rhythm that was small and fleeting, but certainly ticked away in the center of her chest. A heartbeat.

Right now, within acceleration, it was impossible to hear the actual beating of a heart in reality. But it was impossible that it was an auditory hallucination. Desperately straining his ears and listening, Haruyuki suddenly understood.

This was a sound being issued from Kuroyukihime's will. Right now, Kuroyukihime was desperately fighting. On the edge of life and death, she was desperately resisting in order to hold on. That strong will had become a heartbeat, and was resounding in the virtual battlefield.

"...That's right..."

Haruyuki murmured. At the same time, new tears flowed out, dripping hot. Inside his ears, he faintly heard the words Kuroyukihime had told him once again.

—The meaning of strength isn't about the result of winning.

I didn't know the meaning of being strong at all. Without knowing it, I simply envied and gave up.

"Strength is about simply «winning»..."

Even if I'm unsightly. Even if I look ridiculous. Even if I am defeated at the end, fall to the ground, and am covered with mud.

Kuroyukihime—Black Lotus, after surviving a life-and-death battle with the other Kings, held her breath and continued staying hidden in a small network. But, that wasn't because she was cowardly, or afraid. It's because she never gave up. Because she never looked down.

"...To simply «resist». To still keep looking towards the sky even after falling down...that is the only proof of strength. Isn't that right...senpai?"

There was no response.

But, Haruyuki clearly felt a powerful beating being born deep within his own chest as well.

His heart's pulse became a signal and was transmitted to his brain.

And then once more, the soul, the will, the spirit that confronts adversity accelerated.

As long as there was this beating in his chest—

"I can still stand...I can still fight!"

Haruyuki cried that out to himself, and to Kuroyukihime.

He grasped the edge of the bed with his right hand, threw all his strength into his left leg, and stood up while staggering.

Minute fragments fell from his entire body while glittering. But, the beat that had been born from his chest flowed heat all the way to his wounded limbs, and trembled intensely.

Suddenly—

Intense white light was emitted from the many cracks in his armor.

At the same time, the armor on his back crumbled greatly, and a feeling of blowing away came on him. Haruyuki opened his eyes wide and bent his body backwards as he threw back his head.

There was a big mirror on a wall that was a short distance away in front of him. Perhaps it was a magic mirror that connected with the monitor room next door in the real world. Right now, like the bed, it had changed

into a huge full-length mirror bordered by black cast-iron thorns on its edges.

In the middle of that mirror, the form of Kuroyukihime lying on the bed of thorns, and of himself standing up was reflected.

His entire body's armor was in very bad condition. His left hand and right leg were torn off from the middle, and his chest had deep cracks radiating across it. The cracks also reached to his back, and a cracking sound seemed to be resounded from there. Every time a thin spark ran out, small pieces of broken armor scattered about, and—

".....!?"

Dumbfounded, Haruyuki watched as some white and shining things started extending out slowly, slowly from the left and right side of his back.

They seemed to be two sharp oblong and thin pieces of metal. Swords—  
?

The instant he thought that, the two extending metal fragments made a clear swishing noise and spread out like a semi-circle. Nearly ten thin folded-up metal fins also respectively unfolded from the tip of the first sword-like protuberance.

These—weren't weapons, but...

——Wings.





Haruyuki remained dumbstruck for less than one second.

Hot!!

Feeling a terrible heat along his entire back, Haruyuki raised his body as if to repel it.

He staggered back several steps on his knees while writhing, and shrunk his small body by embracing his shoulder with his arm.

Rather than hot temperature-wise, it felt more like a cluster of pure energy was crammed airtight inside his back, swirling as it wanted to go somewhere.

"——!!"

It's no good. I can't hold it down any longer.

As he bent his body like a bow and faced above, ahead of Haruyuki's gaze was—

He saw the huge hole that had been drilled through the building by his body only tens of seconds ago. And also a small yellow light that looked isolated on the other side of that black and deep hole. A corridor leading to the far away sky.

It's calling me.

Moving unconsciously, Haruyuki raised his broken left arm up high, and drew his intact right arm to his side. He felt the energy raging at the tip of his shoulder blades suddenly increase in density and compress.

After returning his gaze just for a moment to catch sight of the stretched-out form of his beloved person.

Haruyuki fixed his gaze above once again.

"——Gooooooooooooo!!"

He stuck out his right arm straight ahead along with that shout.

DOOO!!

Along like an explosion-like impact sound, a silver light cut through the darkness.

In an instant, Haruyuki's entire body flew straight up like a fired arrow.

GOH, GOGOGO....

Each time he passed by one of the hospital's floors, the air twisted in his ears.

Going through the dark corridor in just a few seconds, the silver avatar flew out from the drilled hole to the roof, and then kept flying higher and higher. The metallic fins on his backs vibrated loudly at high-speed. That energy accelerated his small body with overwhelming momentum, easily cutting off the virtual gravity and persistently, persistently pushing Haruyuki upwards.

Immediately, the swirling black clouds drew near in front of him.

The instant he touched the thick cluster with his raised right fist, the clouds were pushed away like mere coins with a loud whoosh.

After having gone through and moreover ascended out of a black tunnel, a pale yellow and dazzling light filled Haruyuki's vision.

Immediately after going through that sea of clouds, Haruyuki expanded both his arms and legs, reducing his acceleration. The high-pitched vibrating sound lowered in pitch, and a soft floating sensation like when an airplane has finished taking off came upon him.

While gently hovering, Haruyuki spun his body around.

"...Aah..."

Unconsciously, he leaked out a voice mixed with a breath.

A view beyond imagination was spread out beneath his eyes. From the breaks in the sea of clouds that flowed and swelled, he could see an unbroken view the huge dull-colored city that continued on as far as the eye could see. The Shinjuku urban center which had changed into leaning spires was there, and a deep forest was over there, and the building that looked like a towering magic fortress was perhaps the Imperial Palace.

When he looked in the other direction, streets that continued from Suginami to Mitaka to Hachioji<sup>[11]</sup> extended out as far as he could see, and over there were the mountains of Okutama, and the steep high peak

next to them that towered through the sea of clouds was probably Mt. Fuji.

Finally looking to the south, Haruyuki caught sight of a grey level surface that shone brilliantly.

The sea. The Tokyo Bay. And—the Pacific Ocean, which spread on endlessly.

Infinite.

"This world...is infinite..."

While murmuring that, Haruyuki slowly, slowly began to descend.

Sinking back through the clouds from behind, he went through to the bottom of them and approached the ground.

Once he had descended to a height where he could start seeing the details of the streets below, he made his fins vibrate strongly again, and hovered once more.

Just thirty meters below Haruyuki as he regained his posture, was the roof of the hospital.

That battlefield that he had thought so large and wide now looked small, as if he could pick it up with his hands. And the form of the blue giant, standing at the edge of the big hole in the center and looking up towards him, was still there as well.

Cyan Pile gazed up at Haru for nearly a full three seconds, as if his soul had fallen out.

He weakly raised his left hand, and leaked out a hoarse voice.

"Ha...Haru..."

But those words were erased by the loud commotion that suddenly arose.

Voices. The gallery people, that stood on the roofs of the buildings surrounding the hospital and watched the duel between Silver Crow and Cyan Pile, all simultaneously raised their voices in a squall.

"He isn't...he isn't falling!? He's completely stationary!!"

"It isn't a jump...he's flying!? No way!?"

"A «Flight Ability»...it's finally appeared. Look at those wings!! That's a «Flight-type Avatar»!!"

Haruyuki didn't understand why the gallery was in such a clamor. As he stared down in mute amazement, among the the duel avatars came up to several tens, some moved towards higher positions, while others drove their finger to their consoles.

"There's no data on him! Where is that guy from!? What legion does he belong to...who's his «Parent»!?"

"F-For now, let's contact headquarters! You, log out and go tell them!!"

"Don't joke around! As if I'm going to miss what happens next!!"

What calmed down this uproar that was like a prodded beehive—was a terrible shout that was suddenly released.

"Oo...Ooooooooooh!!"

Spreading his arms and legs, Cyan Pile bellowed. The tremor that rocked the atmosphere like an electric shock reached even Haruyuki far up in the sky.

"No!! Nononononoooooooooo!!"

As it made a mechanical 'GASHUU!!' sound, he pointed his right arm's launcher tube straight at Haruyuki.

"Don't!! Don't you!! Look down on meeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!"

A scream as if spitting up blood.

At the same time, a metallic clang resounded, and the loaded steel stake scattered out many lines of light.

As Cyan Pile struck a stance of spreading out both legs, dropping his waist and supporting the launcher tube with his left hand, the remaining 40% of his special technique gauge suddenly vanished with a jerk.

As Cyan Pile aimed what was likely his final attack technique at him, Haruyuki quietly lifted up his right hand while hovering in place and clenched his fist hard.

Haruyuki now finally realized the true «special techniques» that was giving to him.

«Punch». And «Kick».

At the same time as those were normal techniques, there were also special super-attacks.

Greatly drawing back his clenched fist, Haruyuki fully expanded all his fins and changed his body's direction. Straight towards Cyan Pile beneath his eyes.

"Fa...aaaall, doooooooooown!! «Lightning Cyan Spike»!!"

At the same time as Cyan Pile screamed out the technique name, the steel needle, having changed into a long beam of light, shot out from his right arm.

Facing it, Haruyuki released all the propulsive power of both his wings while preparing just a punch.

"Uu...oooooooooooo!!"

DOGOOOO!!

As if igniting a rocket engine, Silver Crow's body charged forward as a bullet of light.

In the left-hand corner of his sight, the green special technique gauge quickly began to decrease. At the same time, the white light wrapped around his right fist endlessly increased its radiance.

"Haruuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu!!"

Takumu cried out.



“Taku————!!”

Haruyuki also cried out.

KIIIIIIIIIN!!

A «hyper-acceleration» beyond the acceleration of Brain Burst surged from his back and wrapped around Haruyuki.

The color of the world changed.

Haruyuki certainly saw Cyan Pile’s blue lance rushing up from the ground, and the glare of its single tipped point. Its predicted trajectory stood out like an illusion in his vision.

The speed of Haruyuki’s mind surpassed the speed of the attack that was certainly like the lightning the technique was named for. This was the power of a true «accelerated person» that Kuroyukihime found and believed in.

I can see it...I can see it, senpai!!

Haruyuki shouted that out in his thoughts.

The speed of the lance fell.

In comparison, Silver Crow’s speed increased endlessly, as if he had become light itself.

Both of them closed in and blended—in that instant, Haruyuki slide his charging trajectory a little to the right.

ZASHUUU!!

The lance grazed the left side of his helmet, passed through and scattered fierce sparks.

Immediately after.

Haruyuki's «Punch» deeply, deeply went through the center of Cyan Pile's chest.

Along with a roaring 'SUGAAA!!' sound, their two bodies were blown off together while carving a deep rut in the roof's floor.

They crashed into the steel fence of the roof, smashed it into pieces and sprung out into the open air.

"...Oooh!!"

Haruyuki cried out and made his metallic fins flap.

The intense and powerful lifting power wrapped around his entire body. While embedding his right arm all the way into Cyan Pile's body, Haruyuki pointed his trajectory upwards and rose higher, higher.

He pierced through the sea of clouds in several seconds and flew out into the yellow sky.

After he reduced acceleration and shifted to hovering, Cyan Pile, who seemed to have lost consciousness at the moment of impact, made a coughing noise under his mask from where it lay on top of Haruyuki's shoulder.

"Go...fuh..."

After his huge figure quivered for a bit, he raised his head.

Immediately after, he let out a thin scream that made his angry voice of resentment until now seemed like a lie.

"U...wah...!? F...fly...ing...!?"

While shaking his mask left and right, he cried out further.

"Stop it, Haru...! D...Don't drop me!! If I fall now...I'll l-lose..."

Both of their health gauges were dyed deep red together, and their width had decreased to the point of being thing like a thread. Cyan Pile's entire body was still from the fear of falling from struggling, and he changed his voice to a tone of begging.

"If...if I lose...if I lose against to a Level 1 like you, my points will become zero...but it's fine for you, you'll only lose 4 or 5 points anyhow! Please, please surrender here, Haru! I can't lose Brain Burst now!!"

"Taku...Takumu..."

While murmuring as if groaning, Haruyuki strongly clutched his right fist that was still pierced through Cyan Pile.

What—What are you saying after all this time!! You tried to take away all of Kuroyukihime's points...You tried to erase that person's Brain Burst, and her one and only wish!

Right now, with just the smallest change of his arm's angle, he could deprive Cyan Pile's huge body of support and make him fall to the ground far below. Takumu would lose about 40 points and at the same time have Brain Burst forcefully uninstalled. And then—he wouldn't be able to attack Kuroyukihime-senpai from beyond the local network again.

Haruyuki gritted his teeth to the point of breaking them.

His whole body trembled, and then the momentary urge passed from his head to his toes and left him.

The voice he pushed out from the space between his clenched teeth was cracked, as if it wasn't from himself.

"...Do you acknowledge it, Taku?"

".....W-What...?"

"You can never win against me anymore in this accelerated world. Do you acknowledge that, Taku!!"

An instant of silence.

The words that were returned through the body glued to him were quiet, as if something had collapsed.

".....Yeah. That's true...As expected, I can't win against you. Just like in the various games we played together in the past..."

Haruyuki inhaled deeply, and then exhaled. Then, he spoke in the same quiet voice.

"Then...me and you are the same."

"...!? W-What.....?"

"In the real world, I can never win against you. But, in this world, you can't win against me. We are the same. That's why...that's why."

Pausing in his speech, Haruyuki looked at the bluish-white eyes within Cyan Pile's mask, and then continued.

"That's why...become my ally...my comrade, Taku. Just like me, fight as that person's subordinate from now on."

Takumu became speechless and gasped sharply. After a short time, a hoarse groaning voice leaked from beneath his thin slits.

"...Don't be stupid, Haru, you should know as well. Your parent...«Black Lotus», who tries to hide and hunt the legion I belong to as well, is Accel World's biggest traitor! In other words...to fight together with her would mean..."

"That's right. We would have to beat the «Six Kings of Pure Color». That's nothing to feel frightened about. Let me tell you something good...Something like that is how a game essentially is."

After Haruyuki declared that, Takumu responded with a long silence.

The words he let out several seconds later seemed to be dinged with a self-derisive smile.

"...Haru, do you still believe in me? Even if I say yes here, do you intend to believe in my words without any basis at this late hour? The words of me, who broke the laws of my legion, broke the rules of Brain Burst, and betrayed my only two friends?"

"After this, the two of us will tell Chiyu everything."

As Haruyuki immediately retorted back, Takumu let out an astonished breath for the nth time today.

"Eh...!?"

"About Brain Burst, about our battle, and also...about the feelings you and I kept hiding, we'll confess it all to her."

Haruyuki turned his gaze towards the sky that continued on far away into infinity, and slowly spoke.

"We probably have to start from there. Until now, all three of us kept hiding the things we shouldn't have hidden. We doubted the things we shouldn't have doubted. We have to start over...from somewhere."

".....Start over...do you really think that, Haru? I...I, to Chii-chan's Neuro Linker..."

As Takumu said that with a trembling voice, Haruyuki hit his back lightly with his broken left arm.

"She's be mad enough to die, alright. She'll yell, she'll rage...but in the end, she'll forgive, if it's her."

Haruyuki said that with a laugh in his voice as they slowly began to descend.

Returning to the roof and freeing himself from Silver Crow's right arm, Cyan Pile staggered back several steps and then sat on the floor with a thud.

Haruyuki briefly confirmed the remaining time. After two minutes and a little more, this long duel would end.

Just in case he clicked on the gauges to confirm them, but their remaining health had both the exact same numerical value. If the time ran out like this, the result should be a draw and an exchange of points shouldn't occur.

Looking at Cyan Pile once again, who was hanging his head between his knees and wasn't moving, Haruyuki thought in his mind.

Am I...making a mistake?

Should I have mercilessly thrown Takumu to the ground back them, and made the possibility of him breaking his promise afterwards and attacking Kuroyukihime completely zero?

No—that's wrong. To doubt in others, or to believe in others, it's the same as to doubt myself, or to believe in myself.

I believe in myself who has decided to believe in Takumu.

It's fine like this, right...?

He called that out with the voice of his heart—immediately after that.

The elevator door opened behind him, resounding with a grave metallic clank.

In the instant that his whole body stiffened and quickly looked back, Haruyuki guessed which form would appear before his eyes here, and believed once again.

It's impossible for it to be a new enemy. Since the only ones who could fight on this stage were Haruyuki and Takumu.

And it couldn't be an unknown duel avatar. There was no reason for an unrelated spectator to appear from the hospital.

But, the instant he actually confirmed it with his own eyes, Haruyuki's breath stopped, his chest was filled with something hot, and tears flowed from both his eyes.

A pure black, as if the essence of darkness was condensed. The clear silver which colored its edges.

The cold wind which blew too much shook her long rolling hair and the hem of her skirt, and lightly chimed the bells that decorated her parasol.

"Sen...pa..."

His squeezed-out voice trembled thinly like a small child's.



Looking at Haruyuki as he dragged his broken leg and went forward one, two steps—

Kuroyukihime tilted her head to the side and at the same time smiled pleasantly.

“Senpai!!”

Finally calling out with a decent voice, Haruyuki ran up to her at maximum speed while letting out irregular clanking sounds.

Kuroyukihime also ran up to him with her high-heels clicking furiously.

There was neither hesitation nor nervousness at all as he stretched out their arms and dive into the other’s opened arms.

Hugging her soft and sweetly fragranced body with all his might, Haruyuki cried out in a voice mixed with sobbing.

“You’ve...you’ve regained consciousness! Thank goodness...I believed...I believed that you’d definitely be saved...thank goodness...truly...”

Holding Haruyuki in her arms as if wrapping him up, Kuroyukihime pressed her cheek near while remaining silent for a while.

Finally, the whispery voice that resounded in his ear was wet like his.

“...Within the darkness that was neither heaven nor earth...I heard only your voice. You...protected me, didn’t you? Getting this hurt...”

Her right hand gently stroked Silver Crow’s crack-covered body.

"Becoming so torn-up...Thank you...thank you, Haruyuki-kun."

"No...Senpai was the one who protected me. Because I heard you say...that you believed in me, that's why...I was able to fly."

Kuroyukihime nodded several times in silence, and gently stroked the thin wings stretching out from Haruyuki's back with her extended hand.

"They're beautiful...This is your power, the potential that was hidden within Silver Crow. Until now...there has never been a single duel avatar that possessed a true flying ability. As I thought, my premonition wasn't wrong. You are the person who will change this world."

Kuroyukihime softly lowered Silver Crow's small body onto the ground with her hands.

Inclining her head and looking down at Haruyuki with a smile, the fairy princess with her ephemeral silhouette spoke in a tone that possessed just a little strength in it.

"It seems the time has come...The time for me to also leave my peaceful cocoon and aim for the sky once more."

She then turned her gaze to look behind him. Cyan Pile, who was sitting at the place he had been left at, had only raised his eyes a little while still hanging his head and was looking at the two of them.

"To you as well...I should apologize, Cyan Pile."

The words from Kuroyukihime were unexpected.

"I also disgraced the duel which should have had honor with you many times. I will show it now, my true form. And if you so wish, I will face you with my full strength."

Raising her right hand, she quickly operated her virtual console.

BACHI. BACHIBACHI!!

Black lightning that was suddenly released wrapped around the avatar of the fairy princess over and over again.

Before the eyes of Haruyuki as he hurriedly took several steps back, the form of the silhouette that was wrapped in purple light changed little by little, little by little. The skirt that nearly grazed the floor quickly shortened, and split into sharp serrated edges. Her arms and legs became perfectly straight lines, and the tips contracted like needles.

The long hair melted into the light and vanished, and in its place a mask shaped like a bird of prey with wings at the back appeared—and finally, after still more lightning soared, all of the effects disappeared.

What stood there, as if cut out of black crystal, was a beautiful, extraordinarily beautiful duel avatar.

The form of its entire body was somewhat similar to Silver Crow's.

But its height was quite tall, over a hundred-and-seventy centimeters. Elegant, though mainly a straight line, and wrapped in black armor that gave a feeling of transparency, the body was thin like a doll and

connected to an armored skirt similar to a black lotus flower which surrounded the waist.

And the characteristic that stood out above anything else were the limbs. Both arms and legs were chillingly long and sharp swords. Looking as if they would immediately cut in half anything they touched, the blade edges that emitted a bright radiance faintly resounded coldly, coldly against the stage's breeze.

The front part of the head, which was shaped like a V tilting towards the back, had utterly black mirror-like goggles. Within that, two bluish-purple eyes shone with a vibrating 'VIIIIN' sound.

Haruyuki stood stock still for a short while as if his soul had fallen out. Cyan Pile also gave off the same speechless feeling from where he sat. To the two of them, more than that violently beautiful form—they were overwhelmed by the bottomless potential that rose out from that entire slender and jet-black body.

Haruyuki was certain that, if he «battled» that, he would be minced up without even having a few seconds and would disappear while crumbling into pieces.

Eventually, Haruyuki squeezed out a voice from his chest that was similar to a sigh somehow.

"It's...beautiful. Very...beautiful...Senpai said it was ugly before, but...it's not like that at all..."

"Hmm...is that so..."

Only the voice that came out was still like Kuroyukihime.

"Even though I have no hands to hold someone with..."

Those words didn't continue to the end.

D O O O O O !!

Suddenly, fiercely loud voice of shock burst out once again from the surrounding buildings.

"U, uooo! Oooooo—!?"

"That's...That duel avatar is...!!"

"«Black Lotus»!! The «Black King»!! She was in such good health——!!"

The shouting voices of the gallery were at a volume that was clearly more than double than when they had seen Silver Crow take flight.

Kuroyukihime looked at the surroundings and then spoke while lightly shrugging her shoulders.

"Now then...Silver Crow. Will you take me along and fly?"

"Eh, ye...yes."

No matter how high her potential may be, her actual weight couldn't be greater than Cyan Pile's. But, even if she said 'take me along', how should he...?

Moving with a hover while emitting a faint vibrating sound right up to the bewildered Haruyuki, Kuroyukihime turned her body to the right and raised her arms with a casual gesture while lowering her waist.

As if inviting him to give the so-called «princess carry».

Though thinking 'Eh!?', Haruyuki knew he could under no circumstances run away and escape here. While dripping sweat drops from his helmet—or rather while experiencing the illusion of that, Haruyuki awkwardly held out both his arms and put them around Kuroyukihime's back and waist.

"Please take care of me."

Saying that in a somewhat playful tone, Kuroyukihime entrusted her body to Haruyuki's arms. While being poured on by Takumu's gaze, which might have been his imagination that it seemed teasing, Haruyuki resolved himself and carried the avatar of black crystal. Fortunately, it wasn't that heavy like he thought, and Haruyuki then made the fins on his back vibrate strongly and kicked off the floor with his one leg.

With 'Gyuuu!', he moderately accelerated and aimed for the sky.

From within his arms, Kuroyukihime cried out in a whispery voice while craning her back and neck in order to survey the streets below.

"This is...incredible! It seems I could get addicted to this...Next time, I want us to direct connect duel and fly for the whole thirty minutes...oops, this is high enough."

"Yes."

Nodding, Haruyuki switched to hovering.

They weren't that high up. Below, the countless duel avatars gazing upwards from the scattered roofs could be clearly seen.

Kuroyukihime inhaled a single, big, breath, and—

She shouted in a dignified and swelling voice, seeming to reach out to the other side of the horizon.

"Hear me!!"

Just then, everything within the stage turned silent.

"Hear me, you Burst Linkers of the Legions of the Six Kings!! My name is Black Lotus!! The one who opposes the rule of the tyrant kings!!"

The swelling black clouds shrunk back, and even the hard-blowing wing held its breath. The only thing that moved was the timer, which had only ten seconds left. In this silence, the loud declaration echoed through the world.

"I, and my legion «Nega Nebulous», will now emerge from the depths of the net that we have hidden within, and destroy this false peace!! Take up your swords!! Alight the fires!! The time to fight — Has come!!"

## Chapter 9

Late autumn weather.

Speaking of which, what month was it now?

While thinking that, Haruyuki walked along the path to the hospital that he was now completely accustomed to. The rhythm of his shoes hitting the pavement quickened unconsciously. 'I'll be sweaty by the time I get there', he thought, but even so he couldn't stop himself.

Today was the day that Kuroyukihime was finally being moved from the ICU to the general recovery ward.

Of course, the ICU prohibited direct meetings, so the last time they had actually seen each other face-to-face was two weeks ago. As such, it was inevitable that he walked with slightly light steps.

He had dashed out of school the instant classes had ended, so the November sun was still high in the sky and warm sunlight pressed down on his back. The charging data-collecting group of the newspaper club, who had heard information about it from somewhere, had been lying in wait for him at the school gates, but he had activated his recently rusty «running-and-escaping skill» and somehow succeeded in escaping to outside the local net.

He had also been feeling light on Sunday yesterday, as they had gone out to play as three childhood friends for the first time in so long.



Leaving aside when Haruyuki had carelessly connected to the sightseeing tourist network while they were climbing up the New Tokyo Tower and had been challenged to a «duel» (which he had luckily won by having the advantage of super-height), it had been a very fun day off without any trouble.

On the day of that decisive battle three weeks ago, Haruyuki and Takumu had visited Chiyuri's house together, and had confessed everything, really everything, in Chiyuri's room.

The reason why Takumu confessed to Chiyuri two years ago, the reason why Takumu was steadily driven into a wall since then, and the reason why Haruyuki and Takumu recently had come to a confrontation where they knocked their innermost feelings against each other.

Chiyuri didn't easily believe in the existence of «Brain Burst» at first.

In the end, Haruyuki and Takumu had «accelerated», and by finishing the homework that had been taken out by Chiyuri for that day, she finally admitted it was real, but there was an even greater obstacle after that.

When Takumu confessed about the Backdoor virus he had obtained from his «Parent», a blue Burst Linker who served as the captain of his kendo club, and about how he installed it in Chiyuri, Chiyuri displayed an explosion that exceeded Haruyuki's expectations by several times, and had thrown them out of her room while screaming that she hated both of them, that their friendship was over.

After that, Chiyuri didn't speak to them for a week, but she spent time considering Takumu's feelings in her own way and thought that she herself was part of the reason that Takumu did that as well, and so she forgave the two of them on the condition that they would treat her to as many first-class parfaits as she could eat.

Truthfully, Chiyuri and Takumu were still awkward together even now.

But, Haruyuki believed that would be settled with time.

Because Haruyuki and Takumu, after ten years, had finally entered the relationship between them that Chiyuri had wished for—true best friends.

No, probably something more than that,

Right now, Cyan Pile and Silver Crow were a tag team that fought shoulder-to-shoulder in Kuroyukihime's legion.

After signing in to the hospital network while greeting with smile that female nurse that he had become completely friendly with, Haruyuki aimed for the hospitalization ward on the top floor at the highest permissible speed.

He got out from the elevator he had used during the duel, and followed the navigation line towards the hospital room with the room number that he was sent by mail.

The bouquet of flowers in his right hand had flowers buds of a breed that were closest to black, among pink Gypsophila flowers and tropical water

lilies. They weren't in season, so it was expensive beyond his expectations and he had used up all his meager savings that were for buying new game software, but his intention to buy it had already vanished anyway. Since software more exciting than «Brain Burst» couldn't possibly exist in this world.

After walking for only a few minutes, the navigation line quickly stopped short within his vision.

In front of him, there was a sliding door to a private room in the southeast corner of the top floor.

"Umm..."

Haruyuki gulped fiercely, and rehearsed in his brain the words he should say.

'Congratulations'...is that good? No, she hasn't been discharged from the hospital yet, so it would be a little strange. 'Good work'...is of course a no. 'It's been a while'...that's no good either. I meet with her every day on the net. Umm, aaah, what should I do?

SHU.

The door suddenly slid open in front of him, and Haruyuki confusedly sprang back.

Now, a scolding voice came from inside.

"Hey you, how many minutes do you intend to make me wait! Hurry up and enter!"

"Ye...Yes!"

Crying out in a pitiful voice, Haruyuki crossed the door threshold with teetering footsteps while shrinking his shoulders as much as possible.

After hearing the sound of the door closing behind him, he looked up cautiously.

At that instant—all of the wide hospital room, the scenery outside the window, and even the big bed were excluded from his sight.

The only thing that Haruyuki caught sight of was the form of the person he was seeing for the first time in three weeks, wearing cute pink pajamas and a black cardigan.

She seemed to have become a little thin. Her originally white skin had lost even more color as if becoming transparent, her always silky and flowing hair was gathered in a braid that seemed tightly firm, and her entire left leg was covered up by a big cast.

But.

Those eyes—just those big jet-black pair of eyes, which looked as if they sealed the night sky inside, welcomed Haruyuki with a radiance that hadn't changed at all from before.

Kuroyukihime wore a smile like a just-blooming flower bud on her face, and spoke in a slightly hoarse voice.

"Hey...it's been a while, Haruyuki-kun."

"Ye...Yes."

With all the words he had been considering completely blown away, Haruyuki simply nodded while blinking his eyes many times.

After looking at each other like that for nearly ten seconds, Haruyuki finally came to his senses and stepped forward a few steps while holding out the small bouquet.

"U...Umm, please have this, though it's small."

"Thank you."

Kuroyukihime and accepted it in her hands. She brought it near her face and breathed in the fragrance.

"«Black Lotuses», huh. I look forward to when they bloom. I'm sorry, but since the vase is over there, could you draw the water and arrange them?"

"Yes!"

Haruyuki poured water from the sink in the corner of the room into a small vase on the sideboard, put in the received bouquet and then came back.

Silence once again.

The one who undid their connected gazes was Kuroyukihime. Suddenly putting on a stern expression, she spoke in a voice with increased hardness along with a light cough.

"Then...let me hear the report about the aforementioned matter. Please sit on the chair there."

"Ah...Y-Yes."

That's right, this wasn't a merry-and-frolicking situation.

Though he thought that, Haruyuki quietly put his body on the visitor's chair while feeling a touch of loneliness.

He operated his virtual desktop and slid the report he had gathered over to Kuroyukihime.

"Umm... As mentioned before, the Backdoor program was given out in absolute secrecy to several subordinates by Taku's «Parent» for trial use, but thanks to the patch on the matching server last week, it can't be used at all anymore. It seems that «Parent» was «executed» within the Blue Legion...in other words, he was punished by the loss of all his points. However, it seems that he never confessed about who was the maker of that program..."

"Hmph, I see."

Kuroyukihime let out a short breath and placed her head on her crossed arms behind her with a thud.

"Most likely, it came from the yellow side, whose specialty is conspiracies. Instead of using it on themselves, they tested it out on an upper-echelon member of an enemy legion. Well, someday I'll yank out the black curtain with my own hand."

Muttering dangerous words while moving her right hand's finger in imitation of a sword, Kuroyukihime then changed expressions and looked at Haruyuki.

"Then, how is it, our legion?"

"Yes...that is, you could say it's passable, we've somehow gained control of the «Suginami Third Battle District» and «Fourth Battle District»."

"Fufufu, that is a small territory. But, it's splendid. It's just right for a legion composed of only three members."

Kuroyukihime's shoulders shook a little and she laughed.

The Black Legion, «Nega Nebulas». In the past it was said to have been a huge group which ranked among the legions of the Six Kings, but had broken up during the event two years ago and followed the path of extinction. It had brilliantly revived in that declaration—it was good until that point, but at any rate its members were only three people for the moment, consisting of Kuroyukihime, Haruyuki and Takumu, and moreover the strongest rebel «Black Lotus» couldn't go out to actual battles for the time being. It took all their might just to protest the field around Umesato Middle School.

As if guessing what was within Haruyuki's mind, Kuroyukihime spoke while smiling.

"Don't be so downhearted. There's no need to be impatient...increasing our comrades and expanding our area little by little is fine."

"Ye...Yes."

Haruyuki nodded, and put his hand in his uniform's pocket in order to wipe his sweat that was running just a little from meeting after such a long time. Then, instead of a handkerchief, his fingers touched something else.

He pulled out the item he had completely forgotten about. The student handbook with a blue cover that was no longer used for its original purpose now and in the future. It was Kuroyukihime's.

"Ah...that's right, I was holding on to this. I'll return it to you."

Kuroyukihime looked at the notebook he had held out while he said that without thinking really well, and—

She blinked several times, opened her mouth a little, and suddenly blood rushed to her cheeks.

HASHI! Taking the notebook as if snatching it away, she held it to her chest and looked down again.

".....Did you look inside?"

A question that was issued in a faint-sounding voice.





Haruyuki finally realized the reason for Kuroyukihime's reaction.

"Yes! No, yes, no, that is, yes, umm...I...I looked..."

SHIIN.

Suddenly, a short phrase tore through the super-high density frozen atmosphere.

"Forget it."

"...Hah?"

"Erase it completely from your memories and never touch it again. If you speak of this matter from now on, you will experience my Level 9 special technique with your body."

Hiii!?

Gulping, Haruyuki shook his head furiously.

"I won't talk about it, I won't remember it! Ah, I forgot, I completely forgot it just now!"

Keeping her chin up, she glared at the sweating Haruyuki with a sidelong glance.

Kuroyukihime then sighed with a 'Dear me', and gave a smile.

"Geez...Even though you're the «Silver Crow» whose name is already famous now in Accel World, you're still always like that, Haruyuki-kun."

While removing some of the tension in his shoulders, Haruyuki also answered back.

"E-Even Kuroyukihime is the same, your scariness hasn't changed at all...«Black Lotus»-san."

"How rude. I'm always kind...but, speaking of that, Haruyuki-kun."

Giving a cough, Kuroyukihime changed attitudes and spoke with a gentle smile.

"Isn't it about time you stopped calling me by my nickname and used my real name?"

"Ah...Ye...Yes."

After nodding.

Haruyuki—

Realized an unbelievable fact that made him shudder.

"Ah.....Umm."

"Hmm...?"

"I...I...don't...know...senpai's...real name..."

BISHI.

It was as if the world froze again with a hardness and density that was the same as, no, more than when he «accelerated».

However, it was soon melted by a laugh mixed with a sigh by Kuroyukihime.

"I say, you...Didn't you look in my student handbook?"

"Ah...err...that is, I only quickly looked inside it once..."

"Fufu. You really are you, Haruyuki-kun. Then, I'll introduce myself once again. Though, even if I say that, it isn't much different from my nickname."

A gentle wind blew in from the slightly opened window, and the fragrance of the black lotuses softly spread.

Spreading out her thin body a little and putting both hand together in front of her chest, and the top-class beautiful rebellious Black King then spoke in a clear-sounding voice.

"My name is..."

## Author's Notes

I don't know since when it started, but whenever I face with any matter, I only ever prepare myself for despair and disappointment.

It isn't such a cool thing as 'Always expecting the worst and preparing for it'. The reason is that, when you give up from the beginning and then get stuck with giving up from then on, the required energy ends up being little.

When I began to write this story in October 2007 as well, I thought I wouldn't be able to complete it anyway, and I was convinced that if it was completed that the work of erasing and correcting it according to the guidelines of the Dengeki first prize would never end, so I kept telling myself that it was impossible to continue passing as if it were natural through the examinations that ranged over every level after I applied.

Therefore, without having prepared myself by doing something like writing an afterword in the event that I won and got published, I am presently at a loss from the bottom of my heart. I'd like to write an article which has good sense that is rich in shining connotations and wafts painful pathos among overflowing humor, but no inspiration for either of those is coming to mind, so I'll just write what I feel at the present time.

To me, it is already a miracle that I could finish writing this story.

That's why, I couldn't guess at all that this situation right now, of writing an afterword for the paperback book version like this as a prolongation

of that, would make it through the minimal probability and become a reality.

The protagonist of “Accel World”, Haruyuki, is also a person who doesn’t try to do something with stubborn expectations. But, what makes him decisively different from me is that Haruyuki puts forth all his effort to keep escaping, staggeringly and strenuously turning his back away.

I believe that, regardless of the vector, as long as there exists energy there, something may happen one day. I’m not making a comparison with Haruyuki’s earnestness, but if there was a reason besides a miracle and luck that I could win, I think that it would be the small amount of energy that I gathered up while turning my back away.

Before the rough application manuscript was published in a book form like this, I was truly given enormous support from many people.

Kawakami Minoru, who, besides pushing pressure on me and readily consented to explaining, freely gave me many suggestions about the important points of action scenes. The “Accel World Kawakami Edition” that I wrote for that reason (!) is a lifetime treasure.

HIMA-san, who splendidly drew the protagonist, who I expected people would have the most rough time visualizing. The other characters also came to life to the point that it was even as if they had existed in those forms right from the beginning, and have moved around what I had in my mind until now.

The editor in charge of me, Miki Kazuma-san, who kindly, politely and patiently guide me, a newbie who didn't know left from right yet couldn't be said to be absolutely obedient. In order to make your gushing editor power look good, I intend to keep hitting the keyboard with all my might as well.

Also, the many people who have supported me over the global net until now across these long seven years. Because of everyone's support, I'm at his place now.

And finally, I give my biggest thanks to you, who have read this book up until this point.

Thank you very much.

2008 November 28th, Kawahara Reki

## References

1. ↑ First Person Shooting
2. ↑ Nuts to you!
3. ↑ upperclassman, I will use this for speeches
4. ↑ bamboo sword for practice
5. ↑ sword fighting club/event
6. ↑ Non-Player Character
7. ↑ Japanese national baseball tournament
8. ↑ Princess, the 'hime' from the end of Kuroyukihime
9. ↑ A Japanese road or rail system, probably road.
10. ↑ Kuroyukihime usually uses the word "bakemono", which is a more refined way of saying "idiot", while right now she is saying "baka", the simpler and more widely known phrase for "idiot".
11. ↑ These are all different districts within Tokyo.



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